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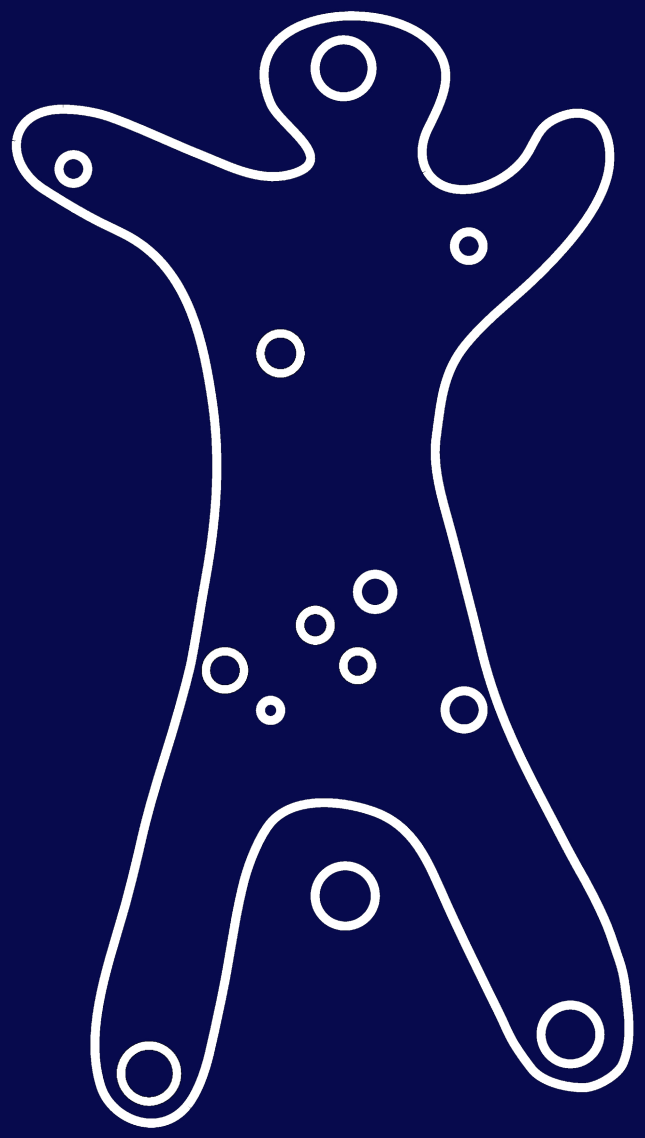

a science'y guide to spirituality and an offering of religious naturalism

by matthew james teigen of california, a.k.a. barnacle the midwit

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Excerpt from "A Beautiful Mind" (2001)

TOBY: You're John Nash, right? Toby Kelly.

JOHN: Hello.

TOBY: I've been studying your equilibrium, the one you wrote here at Princeton. To come up with something totally original, the way you did.

JOHN: You know, I was young. (chuckles)

TOBY: I've been developing a theory; I believe I can prove that Galois extensions are covering spaces. That everything, everything is connected. That it's all part of the same subject.

JOHN: When was the last time you ate?

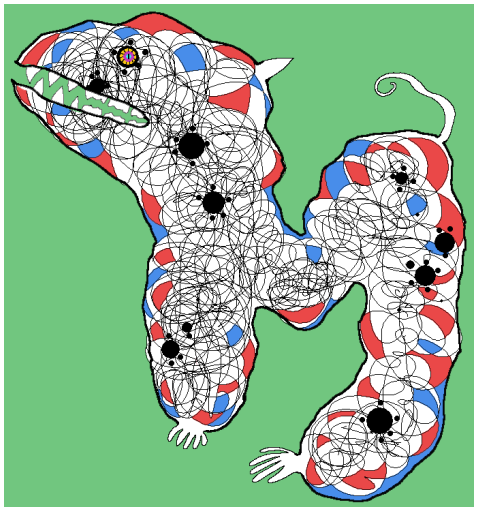
TOBY: Excuse me?

JOHN: You know, food.

TOBY: Oh, uh…

JOHN: My wife, she loves mayonnaise. (gives Toby a sandwich)

TOBY: Thank you.



This is It!

A religion old or new, that stressed the magnificence of the universe as revealed by modern science, might be able to draw forth reserves of reverence and awe hardly tapped by the conventional faiths. Sooner or later such a religion will emerge. - Carl Sagan

Zay said I should write a book about *stuff*. Zaylea quit coming around but I remember her fondly. Well, here it is. It's a booklet — a small book — about what the title implies: what might be a meaningful way to encapsulate this weird world around us? How should we proceed if the religions of that world don't hold any "juice" for us? Is there something *more* to it all even if we never "got" anything out of the religions of our parents and of their parents? Times they are a-changin'. Tradition has value but metaphysics based on old understanding of cosmology is contemporarily untenable and in need of revision.

I intuit that people crave real spirituality[1], and that its inaccessibility causes them to turn to an alternative encyclopedia — alternative facts, like evolution denial, this denial, that denial. People go through this world in efficacious-feeling scientific-materialist control over their day to day lives, putting gas in their tanks and sending emails and wallowing in tech comfort, and when they get some inkling that they are missing something, they don't know how to go about getting it and turn to dogma instead of looking at the world and looking at the self. The great realization — the end goal of "spirituality" — is to know, to deeply know, that you are part of the world; to realize that you can never be lonely again. This might be what they mean when they say "God is love," something I did not understand for a long time[2].

In my MFA program I wanted to do "spirituality and art" but was dissuaded, ostensibly because it was too broad and ill-defined (true), and because I might have been juried rigorously by medievalists in the art history department wielding specificities, but now I suspect the reason was in part that one of my fellow advisees (hi, Guatam) was already doing spirituality in art and my advisor preferred variety. So instead I did "math and art," and had included something about God or "god" or whatever that turned out too fluffy to keep so I deleted it. In a way I don't look like a spiritual person — too many science picture books as a child. I was embedded in family lore for replying "that's nonsense" at age 3, 4, 5, whatever, when my mom told me something about Christianity — maybe the incarnation, trinity, or any one of a number of supernaturalistic paradoxes — and was celebrated as a prodigious logician rather than condemned as a glib blasphemer.

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[1] "Spirituality" might be as simple as what goes on in your head; feeling lasting good about the life you lead. More deeply, it is a sense of transcendence (there are things bigger than you and beyond your grasp), as well as immanence (make me one with everything!).

[2] "*Love says 'I am everything.' Wisdom says 'I am nothing'. Between the two, my life flows*" - Nisargadatta Maharaj. This famous quote suggests Hindu/Buddhist, infinity/zero, universal self/no-self opposition, as well as a potential agreeance or harmony.

Does it ever strike you as strange, and oddly particular, that there is a blue sky above[3], big long hard objects poking out of the ground (trees), and bipedal organisms walking around with round heads (us)? I mean...why *that*, in particular? Why is the night sky black with points of light in it? Why, if we look closely at the leaves on one of those trees, is it divided into little compartments (cells)?

In fact this is a relatively easy question to answer; it is "the easy question," often targeted at consciousness — Q: why is structure before us the way it is? A: it evolved probabilistically from preconditions. Details are unnecessary to understand the basic premise: at the big bang pure energy exploded into being, and via probabilistic outcomes shaped into the four fundamental forces and the elementary particles we know. From there, the extant properties of these objects caused them to coalesce and evolve into more complex forms, like stars and molecules, each with their own properties. So it's sort of a chain of determined causality, set in motion by a process that could have gone infinitely many ways — emergence. Our universe arrived at its contemporary uniqueness on a large and complex decision tree branching over space and time.

But regardless of its shape, *why does any of this exist at all* (a much harder question)? Why was there a big bang? When I was maybe 11 I came up with a doozy during church with my dad: "Maybe God created the cosmic egg!" I whispered in the middle of the service. The "cosmic egg" was a concept that may now be mostly abandoned; it describes a super-dense object that exploded as the "big bang." The cosmic egg seems to presuppose a time "before" the big bang, which is an impossibility inasmuch as time itself, along with space, were part of what "exploded into being." So where did all this energy come from? We don't know but there are ideas (zero point energy of a previous vacuum state, a wormhole into another dimension or universe, our universe having collapsed into something like this "cosmic egg" and re-exploding...it's an endless list and it's speculative because we do not, and maybe cannot, have informational access to other universes or what encapsulating structure "contains" the multiverse or multiverses).

Everyone is required to own 1) a telescope, and 2) a microscope. Exceptions can be made in cases of hardship and some gesture in that direction will be considered to be in good faith (binoculars and a magnifying glass).

In this work I will talk about the way I believe things are, or might be. It makes sense to me but it's not science – it's not empirical experimental knowledge. I reference the crystalized body of scientific knowledge that has been passed down to me as digestible culture from the beaks of Neil deGrasse Tyson and illustrated encyclopedias, but I am not a scientist and I hope I don't pretend to be one; I will pretend to be a philosopher, however. I wrote a blog post (no longer online) after I had arrived at a micro/macro-cosmic worldview sort of by accident, after some exposure to Advaita Vedanta and Buddhism and attempting to reconcile their essential philosophical difference (universal self vs. non-self – infinity vs. zero; numbers that are "strange" in similar ways[4]):

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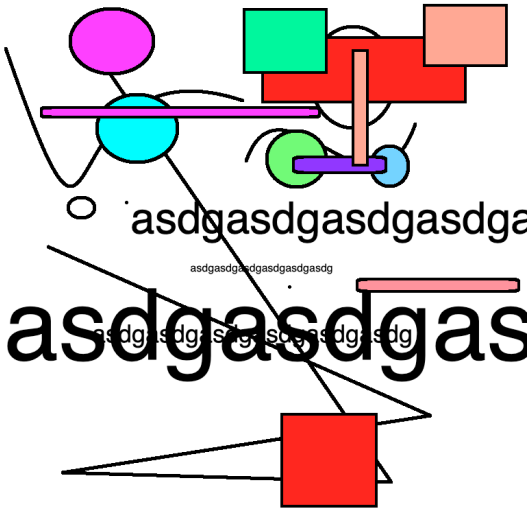
[3] The sky is blue because small wavelength (a.k.a. high energy) light bounces off air molecules more exuberantly; the quality of *blue* that we map onto high energy light is the greater mystery.

[4] Hinduism (specifically Advaita Vedanta, or the philosophical monism in the Upanishads) takes the experienced self to be universal and the root essence of the cosmos. Buddhism takes the experienced self to be a complex illusion emerging from preconditions; it disappears entirely when you look at it. As such these views are like the special numbers infinity and zero, which are sort of similar in essence; at the beginning and end of a number line, but you can't practically land on either.

I NEEEEEED to write about my most recent spiritual revelation, or perhaps non-spiritual revelation: it's turtles all the way down. In other words there's no Brahman or Ground of Being – no fundamental or absolute at the root of it all. This, my new conviction, comes from looking at string theory and quantum field theory conceptually, without doing math, as a philosophy student might. I imagine that the hope of contemporary string theorists might be that with mathematics they have arrived at "the ground of being": that string theory, specifically M theory, which successfully unifies the five previously extant string theories, is the "theory of everything" – that it unifies quantum mechanics, which works at small scales, with general relativity, which works at large scales and frames gravity as the bending of 4D spacetime.

The descent into pure math that occurs at the edges of modern physics might be an indication of the limits of our perception and/or cognition, as humans, rather than mathematical objects themselves being at the root of it all, annihilating or creating particles to create our reality while themselves existing or meta-existing on a sort of cosmic sheet of loose-leaf paper. This sort of thing leads us to a human-centric "information theory" type of worldview in which our own consciousness is the fundamental object, which of course is a mirror of the grand pillar of Hinduism (consciousness is the fundamental reality, aka Brahman). But no, I say.



Instead, my intuition is that if you were to "look at" supposedly fundamental objects like fields, strings, or quarks, with adequate "magnification," you would find complexity and substructure – and furthermore that this fractal microcosm does not end. And, you can look in the other direction: our universe appears to be a finite bubble without edges that has been expanding since the Big Bang, but it seems naive and hubristic to me to assume this is all there is, especially when you look at how basic and specific it all seems from a certain perspective: 92 naturally occurring elements arranging themselves into balls of plasma with smaller balls of rock or gas orbiting them, and on some of these balls life emerges and posts on the internet.

The obvious solution to that rather disappointingly underwhelming specificity is the multiverse; there is OTHER STUFF beyond the familiar layout of the cosmos: the inky black void of gas and dust and nebulae and black holes and so on. We may not have access to the OTHER STUFF in a physical way, but I feel like it is there. After the Big Bang, as matter and energy took shape, things went a certain way: quarks, gluons, four fundamental forces, etc. But, things could have gone an infinite number of others ways, resulting in incomprehensibly different realities. I believe these realities exist, or may exist, if you like. So, there are multiple Big Bangs giving rise to different universes in this multiverse, but...there must be infinitely many other multiverses, themselves within some other larger structure, and on up through the next turtle and the turtles above it!

The necessity of a God, or Ultimate, or Absolute, or Ground of Being, or Brahman, seems like a fallacy of human cognition; according to the artist or artisan, things have an origin or a base substance. That is the way we think and the way we deal with the world around us. But I don't think that's how things really are. Instead, we are suspended at an arbitrary point in this micro-macro infinity where you can look in either direction and find never-ending fractal

complexity. If you want to call this whole thing a pantheistic (but not panentheistic) "God" then fine, but it's not a necessary word for me unless I've been eating magic mushrooms.

"But how do you explain consciousness?" I don't! The seeming spiritual all-importance of consciousness is a function or artifact of the self-reflexive nature of it; consciousness is just another thing in the universe, not the everything of the universe. It only seems to be the latter to us because we're perceiving the world, and consciousness, through consciousness itself, so it's inherently strange-loop'y and confusing (like two mirrors reflecting themselves off into infinities), and generates the Brahmanistic intuitive illusion of fundamentality.

My post is a little midwitty; I'm not sure invoking wave function collapse or string theory is necessary when my main point is "turtles all the way down," or an infinitely cellular/fractal micro- and macro-cosm. In other words, every-thing is made up of smaller things, and is itself one of many things making up a bigger thing. This pattern extends up forever, and down forever, and we are suspended at an arbitrary point along this endless line.

Some of this work makes sense and some of it does not. I change frames of reference and I move the goalposts. I contradict myself ("God doesn't exist!" "God might exist!" "God cannot exist but there He is anyway!"). This might frustrate you or cause you to quit reading, although I surmise that paradox can be a feature, not a bug, in spiritual systems. One more thing: I am self-centered (working on it) and use "I" a lot (the "I" thought!). This comes out of bloggin' for a livin', I would surmise. Your mileage may vary.

I didn't sit down and write this front to back — a lot of it is pulled from my old blog that was up, off and on, for years, and then edited into smoother objects, obsessively and at considerable length; people in my circle may have read portions already but I doubt it (blogging turned out to be a failure for me, so here I am, writing in another way). As such, I feel like parts might not hold together as well as one might feel they should, or read as cohesive, linear, etc. My impulse is then to parry with "Aha! that is the nature of consciousness (or whatever spiritual object) and it is reflected in the style! Nyeah nyeah," but this is the sort of thing people are always saying.

The artwork nestled among these pages is original and handmade, except the periodic table (Wikimedia Foundation), the 19th century gorilla skeleton and bits of human flesh (photocopies of un-recollected library tomes ca. 2000 plus Photoshop), and the "Go to church, or go to hell!" meme (googlin' plus photoshoppin'). And, of course, no photography (cellar spiders in the garage) can truly be original handmade art **ducks flying tomatoes**

Reading is really difficult; writing is way easier. Feedback on this work has mostly looked like "This is incomprehensible and uninteresting but congratulations on the fine intellect." This is not what I wanted. It's possible there exists somewhere a small appreciative or receptive audience I may never find. Theology and science are dense, but I like to write conversationally, informally, non-academically, and can't really do anything else. As always, your mileage may vary.

Cosmology and Metaphysics

The size of our observable universe — a sphere 93 billion light years across with the Earth at its center — is a comment on the limit of observation; beyond its horizon, space is expanding faster than the speed of light and so information beyond this is inaccessible, similar to the way the Planck length is a hard limit for observing microscopically. But those two limits are on observation, and not on the things being observed. Furthermore my religious position is that existence is infinitely nested in sets in either direction, for no reason other than that's the structure we see around us: cells in a leaf on a tree in a forest. I could be wrong though.

My frustration with religions tends to be that they are foundational – some root object, concept, or figure is posited, and then a pyramid of being is ret-conned to have been built up from that. In Hinduism you are given Brahman/Atman, in Christianity you are given Christ, and even in slippery ol' Buddhism you are given Nirvana, the absolute of no-absolute. Taoism might be beyond reproach but it's designed to be that way so it doesn't really get a pass — plus the Tao is a lot like the Christian Logos (an organizing principle). Unitarian Universalism? Sure...come as you are, unless you voted for Trump.

"Anti-foundationalism" usually applies to epistemology[5] but here it means a cosmology and/or metaphysics in which there is no root level. Right now, you might be in your home. Your home is in a neighborhood. Your neighborhood in a town. Town in country. Country demarcated on the land of planet Earth. Earth in a solar system. Galaxy. Cluster. Universe. Multiverse. And beyond, I think, but at that point our power to describe additional structure falls apart. Similarly, at the very base of what we can observe as scientists is the Planck length, which is misunderstood (or at least I misunderstood it til Brian Cox the science explainer came along). In order to observe an object we need to bounce energy off it, and the wavelength of this energy needs to be as big as or smaller than the object. Problem is, the smaller the wavelength, the greater the energy. At the Planck length, the amount of energy needed to observe something this small would be so great that it would create a black hole; $E = mc^2$ would form a singularity of infinite density and infinite gravity (or infinite curvature of spacetime). And, as many people know, "nothing can escape a black hole" – so, fat chance of any energy bouncing back so we can get information about our Planck-sized object.

But the Planck length isn't some kind of hard limit on how small a thing can be, representing a fundamental pixel-like building block of All That Is, but only the scale at which our powers to observe and gather information about materiality cease to be effective. So in a way it's more tied

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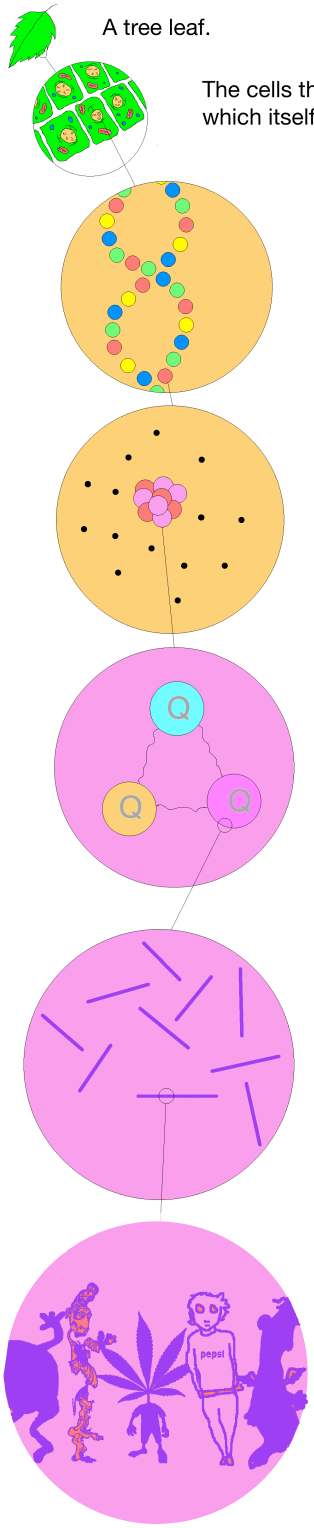
[5] What can be known is often taken to begin with some obvious or existentially necessary axiom; epistemological anti-foundationalism says "no."

to human perception than anything physical or existential; it's more phenomenological than metaphysical. I believe things go smaller (or "smaller") than the Planck length; stuff at that scale has a sub-structure much as protons are made of quarks and gluons, and forests are made of trees.



A tree leaf.

The cells that constitute a leaf. Plants cells are square-ish and contain organelles and a nucleus, which itself contains DNA.

If you zoom in on the DNA, you see that it is composed of atoms of different types, arranged into a double helix. We do in fact have viable photographs of atoms although like DNA strands they are too small to reflect light; we have to use electrons.

Zooming in on one atom, we see protons and neutrons clustered into a nucleus with a surrounding electron cloud; here we run into problems with our Newtonian worldview and set of perceptual/conceptual tools, as electrons sort of don't really exist in the same way we are used to. They constitute a probabilistic cloud and can't really be said to be orbiting at speed, as many of us were taught in our early science education.

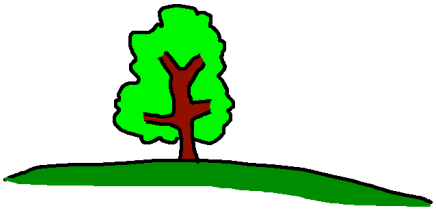
One of the hadrons (neutrons or protons) in the nucleus reveals itself to be composed principally of three valence quarks, bound together by gluons. At this point we really don't know what the objects in question look like or even *are* like, because they are too small to resolve even with electrons.

We don't know if quarks have a substructure but at some point below them we run into the Planck length and the string theory string, both of which are perhaps not coincidentally about the same size. Quarks, gluons, and electrons are known as elementary particles because we don't know how to divide them up and "increase the resolution." But if they did have a substructure, it's possible it would be made of Planck lengths and/or strings, which vibrate those elementary particles into existence.

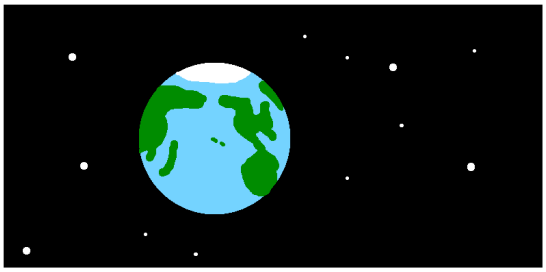
Let's say we could zoom in on a Planck-sized string. We can't, because as I said the energy required to "see" a Planck-sized object would be so great as to create a black hole. But this doesn't mean the Planck scale doesn't have a substructure. My representation of "the next level down" is a series of cartoon characters to illustrate that this substructure might be something beyond comprehension in terms of known physics, and furthermore this microcosmic level might never be accessible to us and instead represent a font of transcendent speculation; the great unknowable.

This kind of "turtles all the way down" intuition about cosmology is not new; Hinduism hints at it although it also posits a root, amounting to consciousness itself, something that I can't really comment on beyond "this seems off to me." I don't want to harshly criticize religions because pride might be the greatest sin of all, as Robert Baron the Catholic bishop, apologist, and philosophy student tells us, and I believe Thomas Aquinas and Augustine of Hippo tell us as well. And, humans have been hacking at grand understanding probably longer than they have been anatomically modern, knowing full well they don't and maybe can't have a complete picture of "what this is." I believe religion needs to be open minded and receptive to little nudges as time goes on; it has to keep evolving. "God is still speaking," to quote the United Church of Christ.

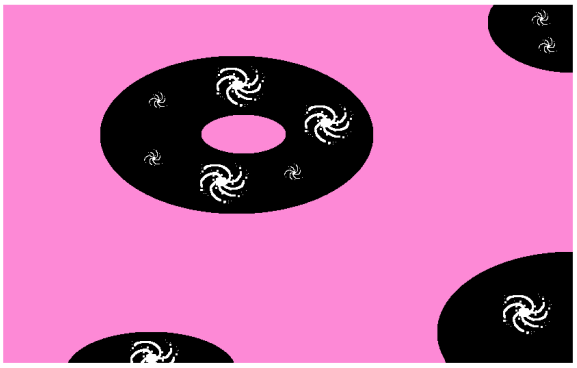
Likewise, it's turtles all the way up, which feels oddly different. On the one hand, the cells and molecules and atoms in our fingertips are right here in front of our faces, whereas planets and stars and galaxies are far, far away. On the other hand, we can actually *see* stars and planets and galaxies, unlike the atoms in our fingers, which are made of particles so tiny that their properties often cease to make Newtonian sense (size without mass, or mass without size). But we are here, suspended where we are, along the continuum of this seemingly infinite micro- and macro-cosm, which is an old Judaic concept.



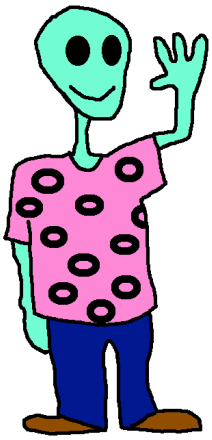
A tree, standing on the Earth.



The Earth, floating in space, along with stars.



Galaxies, which are made of stars, floating in torus-bubble universes, in some kind of pinkish medium.



The universes turn out to be a pattern on some alien dude's shirt; this is silly but it illustrates the unknowability and incomprehensibility of other universes and beyond.

We have our universe, which is readily comprehensible and even maybe a bit boring and uniform when you zoom out: just stars, basically, like tennis balls thousands of miles apart, coalesced by gravity into galaxies, themselves like dinner plates 20 feet apart, punctuated with the occasional empty void maybe a few miles across...maybe a dust cloud or two (you can see one with binoculars if you point them at Orion's dagger). And that's it! That's all we get, in a sense. This sort of suspicious specificity is in part what leads me to believe there must be more, or More, to reference William James. But I think we remain in the natural (i.e., non-supernatural), in the form of *the multiverse*. Voivod, the French Canadian heavy metal band, wrote a song called that. It's out there in culture...people know about the multiverse. It can mean two things, as far as I understand:

1) The multiverse is a function of the "many worlds" interpretation of quantum mechanics, which posits that each branch of probabilistic outcome continues to exist in some extra-dimensional way and there are infinite universes, one for each outcome of probability (one where the quarter landed heads up, and another for when the quarter landed tails up). This blows minds because it means there is an equivalent reality for every fork in the road you experience – a universe where you never got that job, one where you never met your wife, one where you succumbed to cancer as a child, etc. But I don't subscribe to this view. For one thing there are different kinds of infinities, and even if there were *infinitely many universes* does not mean that there would be *every possible universe*. To illustrate this, consider the counting numbers, which are infinite – they go from 1 up to a gazillion. But even though the set of counting numbers has an infinite number of members, it doesn't include fractions like ½; it doesn't include everything. Similarly, I believe that the many worlds interpretation of quantum mechanics allows for *infinite* universes, but not *every possible* universe – not one where a leaf fell an inch to the right of where it did in another universe, or a half inch, quarter inch, a Planck length, etc. You can see in this conceptualization the absurdity of "every possible thing" emerging here; merely "an infinitely large number of things" seems to make more sense. But more fundamentally I don't believe there is a different extant reality for every possible outcome. For one thing, there are other possibilities for dealing with wave function collapse, such as the Copenhagen interpretation.

2) The multiverse is a swarm of universes sort of similar to our own, each born with their own big bang, that amount to enormous finite bubbles without edges. These universes might swim in a sort of medium, itself which may be the gel inside something like a cell, which makes up the foot of some giant horned beast on a planet in a star system in a universe, etc; you see my point. I need to remain in a conceptually Newtonian framework here because I am human with a human brain and up is up, down is down, etc – things make sense to me in a logical way and are tied to the way my brain is structured to interpret and understand the world around me. However, at bigger scales – at the multiversal scale – concepts like size or even number might break down and existence might be fully beyond our comprehension. In other words you (probably) wouldn't be dealing with a horned beast — you'd be dealing with something beyond description.

At our own big bang, four fundamental forces (gravity, strong force, weak force, and electromagnetism) plus some form energy, exploded into being and structure that evolved over the microseconds into particles, atoms, and stars, which birthed planets, which birthed us. But in a different universe things might have gone very differently; there might not be gravity or mass or matter, but something outside of our ability to describe and understand it.

This indescribability — this ineffability — is theologically resonant.

God

Do I believe in God? Can't answer, I'm afraid. I'm not being flippant, but I don't understand the question. What is it that I am supposed to believe or not believe in? Are you asking whether I believe there is something not in the universe (or the universes, if there are (maybe infinitely) many of them), and that somehow stands above them? I've never heard of any reason for believing that. - Noam Chomsky

Most people unattached to a particular tradition but who might nevertheless identify as "spiritual" seem concerned with two principle areas of theology/metaphysics: 1) creation, and 2) afterlife. More on the second in the next chapter, but in the case of the first, the question most often is, "why is any of this here to begin with, regardless of the mechanics of evolution or star formation or the big bang?" As you probably know by now my answer eliminates the need for a beginning by postulating an infinite cellular/fractal structure extending both up and down, that exists because for there to be nothing is an ontological impossibility. But it's easier to postulate a creator, and it might work better for the brains we have and the lives we lead, or even be "true" in a sense.

God is something you *use,* something you *do*, and perhaps most importantly something you *experience*, not something you understand or believe in. He or She or It is a built-in feature of human neurology and it makes sense to take advantage of it, if you are so inclined. "God" as it takes place in the brain is related to fundamental attribution error, or the attribution of phenomena to will-based rather than random or incidental causes. Humans are a relentlessly social species and we see faces in the trees and on the moon; it makes sense that we are programmed to personify the cosmos.

1) In animism, like the religion or thought system of the Native Americans before colonization, you have spirits for everything (wind, fire, ancestors, animals, etc) but no gods per se — spirits are more nebulous and less anthropomorphized.

2) Animism easily evolves into polytheism, in which you have a set of gods, one for every attribute of life, like the Roman or Greek pantheon most of us are familiar with: god of love, god

of war, god of the hunt, etc. You worship these gods and they are important and they are more robust than just spirits.

3) Then, one of these gods becomes the king of the gods, and steals the focus from the others who eventually just fade away, and thereby you get monotheism.

4) This entity-like, spirit-like, capital-G God evolves conceptually such that it is beyond the universe, is the God of everything, and is both transcendent and eminent — this is panentheism, or "all in God."

5) It's not a large step from panentheism to pantheism, with one less syllable, or God being equated with all that is; it reminds me of the "one iota" schism of Christianity that pitted Athanasian vs Arian (Jesus Christ is homoousios or "same substance" as the Father, vs homoiousios or "similar substance").

6) Funny thing is, atheism is more or less the same thing as pantheism, but without the reverence; you have all that is, and you can call this great whole "God" or not, depending on your mood or the presence of hallucinogens in your synapses. Let's say you do not, and thereby arrive at atheism; in that case you still have a human brain that tends to attribute events to human acts, and so you then attribute the wind, the fire, various animals, etc, to *something*, so they grow spirits. And then you're back at first position.

A human is like a panentheistic God inasmuch as it can fit all of this into its brain — a human can encapsulate and "be" beyond the universe, the multiverse, and whatever incomprehensibly lies beyond that, just by drawing a mental picture and labelling it, like T. Rex in a dinosaur book. In this sense consciousness is beyond the universe and contains the universe, but I think that is a kind of category error, like a fish in a bowl believing the outside world is painted on.

Elsewhere I presume God's existence with expressions like "caring for creation," and yet elsewhere I say that there cannot be a God because it would violate scientifically informed metaphysics or is implausible when juxtaposed with and explained by neuroscience. So does God exist or doesn't He?

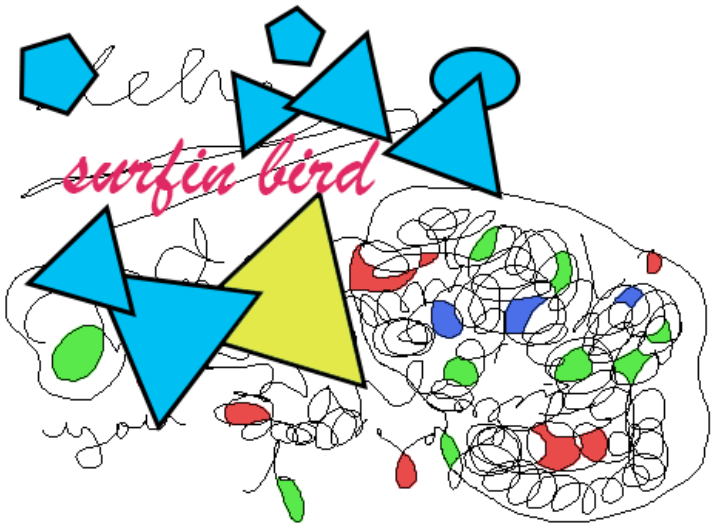
According to Thomas Aquinas, God doesn't need to exist — existence is not a property God has, since in the case of God, His essence is equivalent to His existence. Aquinas's definition of God is that God is the deepest metaphysical level — to be God is to be "to be." This answers the question "why is there something rather than nothing"? It also sounds a lot like hinduistic notions of Brahman and Atman, as well as the liberal Christian theologian Paul Tilich's "ground of being," which came centuries later. But if God is the ultimate category, then it's an easy step to label that category "everything," dispense with a creator/agentic God, and move to pantheism.

Christianity is by far the weirdest (requires acceptance of implausible events) contemporary mainstream religion, and it is also the most popular. No one else claims God Himself was here on the earth, walking around, trying to free Palestine. You have to admit, even if it is your own faith, that it is a standout. But what I like about Christianity, theologically, is that its "Christ" concept, which says "man was God" or "God was man," harkens to Hinduism, which is an older and more inward-turned philosophical system. In Hinduism, YOU, or the consciousness we all feel, is the same thing as the entire universe, or Brahman, which is the sacred godhead. So, in a sense, in both Hinduism and Christianity, man is God. You are God! But the connection ends abruptly before that, I think in most cases — maybe a few very liberal Christians could go with "you are God" and cite concepts like "the inner Christ" but I think mostly Christian faith is more "supernatural theism" than "panentheism." To its detriment, Christianity mostly omits a theology of consciousness.

Marcus Borg presents these concepts as two polls in his book, "*The Heart of Christianity: Rediscovering a Life of Faith*." Supernatural theism means a bearded man in the sky, basically, although stated less crassly — God is a person-like spirit who thinks and feels like a human. Questions around where God is or how big He is are accepted as meaningless and juvenile by spiritual theists, but questions around God's wrath, love, mercy, etc, are not. "Oh, so people designed this God after themselves," a smart little kid might comment. No! It's the other way around: God is human-like, and he made us to "look" like him. That's the party line, anyway. Furthermore, the Frances Scott Key Bridge in Baltimore Maryland is available for purchase now for a limited time at a very low price.

The other end of Borg's continuum is panentheism, or "all in God." Basically, God is the most fundamental "thing," and He encapsulates all else, including (but not limited to!) the material universe with its stars and planets and galaxies and humans and pets and farm animals. But even in the case of these types of theologians, they will still read the bible and talk about God as if he were a spirit person. So I think there's a little bit of confusion there, or at least acknowledged inconsistency.

It's likely humans have a built in theology such that they want or need to think about what's behind everything, what the ultimate cause is, or what to name the great whole. And sure: you can call that God, for what it's worth. At least that way you won't get into trouble at family dinner. The last three questions my Grandpa asked me before he died were 1) have you accepted Jesus Christ as your lord and savior ("yes"), 2) do you go to church ("no"), and 3) do you have a job ("no"). I was put on the spot and decided the best thing was to lie about #1, in part because accepting Jesus Christ as one's lord and savior is kind of a loose concept and you can't really prove that I have not done this, whereas church attendance or putting on a McDonalds uniform is more concrete. Nevertheless I sometimes fantasize about having truthfully answered "no" to all three queries.



The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy's article on "God and Other Ultimates" says God or The Divine or whatever can be broken up into 3 conceptions (spirit person, sum of all reality, "good" behavior). The silliest of these seems to be spirit person because it looks obviously false to a scientific materialist, which we all are to some degree in this modern time and place, as opposed to being obviously true like the other two (of course everything is one, and of course actions have consequences). But it might be better to be open minded about spirit people.

Gods seem to be built into us. We are a social species and tend to see things in terms of personalities, and acts, and will-to-action. In traffic, someone cuts you off, and you blame him and think he did it on purpose to be a jerk, rather than consider that he just wasn't paying attention. This amounts to fundamental attribution error and I suspect it maps to other people — other minds, other wills, other behaviors — being so crucial to humanity's survival. Beyond that, FAE maps to God. God is the ultimate person, the ultimate will, and functions as a stand-in

when there are no real people to praise or blame. If there's a flood, it must be because the rain god is angry with us, since this human tendency to see a will behind everything is so pervasive. Every event must have a cause and every object must have a creator. "Man is the measure of all things."

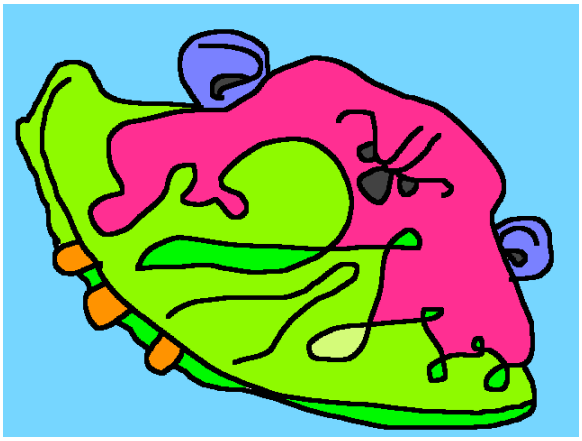
God "exists" in a sense — personification of material phenomena like love, water, war, etc, as well as the universe at large, is built in to human neuropsychology, and maybe it's nice to have an imaginary friend(s), or put less snarkily, a spiritual presence can do some good in life. "Put your trust in the Lord" is helpful I think, because it amounts to an unburdening. The same thing happens with Self Realization and/or Enlightenment, I have heard — suddenly you don't have to worry making the right decision because it all just flows and is not up to you (or "you").

This text centers on the problematic nature of a foundation or ground of all being, so in that way it might be strongly atheistic or even anti-theistic. If there *were* a thing, a something, an "X" that is "beyond" the Russian doll type composite micro/macro-cosmic substructure of an infinite 2D line — residing in another dimension and outside of or containing that line — you would call that thing "God." But God breaks the metaphysics of infinite pantheistic regress, and introduces a duality that feels off; in a way panentheism (sophisticated non-beared sky man Christianity) and dvaita (Hindu dualism) are similar. "Everything is one" feels intuitively true to me, and maybe to everyone if they are being honest; water, and ice cubes, and the glass they are in, seem like different substances. Of course if you look at the water and ice, they are revealed to be the same. But also, if you look at the glass closely, you see it is made of protons, neutrons, and electrons, just like the water and ice.

Equating "God" with physical reality, with everything that is, works — Baruch Spinoza did this, Hinduism sort of did this with caveats, and Buddhism is reluctant to interfere with its own soteriology with pointless ontological metaphysics. But why call pantheism "pantheism"? Why is the word necessary other than to make your aunt happier than she would have been had you told her you were an atheist? Because it changes the way we relate to being, to creation, to the world that God made. If we invoke "God," then suddenly we treat nature and each other with the kind of reverence and compassionate kindness that is explicit in theistic systems; God is love, but God is also optional, and if the concept does not serve you well and is a source of difficulty or pain or whatever, then it isn't your portal.

But if it is — if thinking theistically is natural — then it might help. I sarcastically say "thanks a lot" when I drop my keys, and express gratitude to *something* on those rare occasions when I realize I have a lot of good things in my life. It appears to me that God exists because I feel His presence, although stepping back with scientific revelation might reveal theism to be a built-in mechanism that eases life in important ways but is not ultimately "true" in a cosmological or metaphysical sense.

How should we then flesh out the details of this spirit person or spirit people? I don't think monotheism is necessarily the way to go. In terms of the evolution of human religion, monotheism makes sense: people start off with a pantheon of gods for every little thing, and then one god takes precedence, and eventually the other ones weaken and vanish altogether. Then that one God (here I start capitalizing it) becomes increasingly eminent, increasingly transcendent, until it's more like a synonym for the universe or cosmos or all that exists than a father in heaven or national war god or whatever. The interesting thing is you can take this approach (a pantheistic monistic godhead) and still have many gods. The Hindus do it, and I think Taoists did it, if you smudge Taoism, folk religion, and Chinese society a bit. Hindus use their gods when needed (pray to Ganesha or whomever for more money, or even have one of them represent or "be" ultimate reality itself).



I suspect in ancient times there were atheists, agnostics, and don't-give-a-crap'ists, but they didn't write as much down as the religious fanatics. There's something about our human consciousness — brain-shaped consciousness — that enables us to step outside of our environments and bodies and say "what the heck even is all this stuff, anyway?" Why this, particularly? Why are there neutrons and protons bound together with electrons orbiting them? Why 32 teeth? The answer has often been "because God made it that way;" this is what my mom used to reply when my question blitz got to be too much. Maybe she should have said "because it arose from initial conditions, and there was no first condition — it's conditional turtles all the way down!"

If God works for you, and you want to place one more encapsulating category (even if the new category is named "all that is") such that the properties of said category are that it encapsulates all other categories, then no kind and reasonable person will object. But in my own personal usage at this time and in this place, "god" mostly does not serve to clarify, simplify, comfort, or finalize, unless I want someone to thank, someone to blame, or someone to talk to. I don't feel an intuitive need to attribute existence and the world to a creator, perhaps because I am (or was) an artist myself and I understand that "creation" is really more like amalgamation and recontextualization.

Speaking of creation, in Darwinism, "nature" takes the place of God; it is the divine and mysterious will, except that we know Its methods, sort of, I think. I personally do not really get evolution — specifically, I don't quite understand, in an intuitive and satisfying way, organisms mutating randomly, and those that have beneficially mutated surviving to reproduce while detrimentally mutated organisms die out. It seems like there has not been enough time, enough generations, for random mutations to lead to such insanely complex specificity as parasites who guide insects to behave in ways that will make more of that parasite:

To name just a few examples, some worms induce crickets and other terrestrial insects to commit suicide in water, enabling the exit of the parasite into an aquatic environment favorable to its reproduction. - PubMed Central

Would you have me believe that single-celled, photosynthetic bacteria eventually mutate into a cricket, as well as a parasite that causes said cricket to kill itself in water so the parasite can reproduce, with chemical mind control? This evolved? Like...here's a random mutation that alters some enzyme slightly to cause the cricket brain to seek water? But in the meantime there were other random mutations that altered the enzyme to make the cricket walk slightly slower? It's hard to get a mental handle on. I'm not saying evolution is a lie and God did it all and the world is 5,500 years old, but only that evolution is counterintuitive to me because it seems like even with 4.5 billion years, random mutation and natural selection could not account for the perfection or near-perfection of the interdependent biosphere (yes I know about the nerve that doubles back up and down a long neck rather than take the shortest distance between two points, in giraffes).

Two things: 1) maybe I don't fully grasp the time scales and number of generations involved, and 2) maybe the mutations are not entirely "random." Maybe they can only go in certain directions, something like an emergent property. You see emergent properties in chemistry as simpler things combine to form more complex things, and part of their new structure is they do things

they couldn't do before. The final electron acceptor in cell respiration is the example I remember: because of the electrical properties of oxygen, it functions to strip an electron off a chain of action by motivating its movement, creating energy. And oxygen has these electrical properties because quarks, electrons, gluons, and the four fundamental forces are the way they are.

I'm being fuzzy but the point is, evolutionary mutations might be constrained by pre-existing structure; a bug doesn't suddenly grow a piano on its head and then die out because it's too heavy, but instead grows bigger claws to better catch other bugs. Maybe emergent properties guide mutations in a beneficial direction. Anyone? Anyone? Bueller? Bueller?

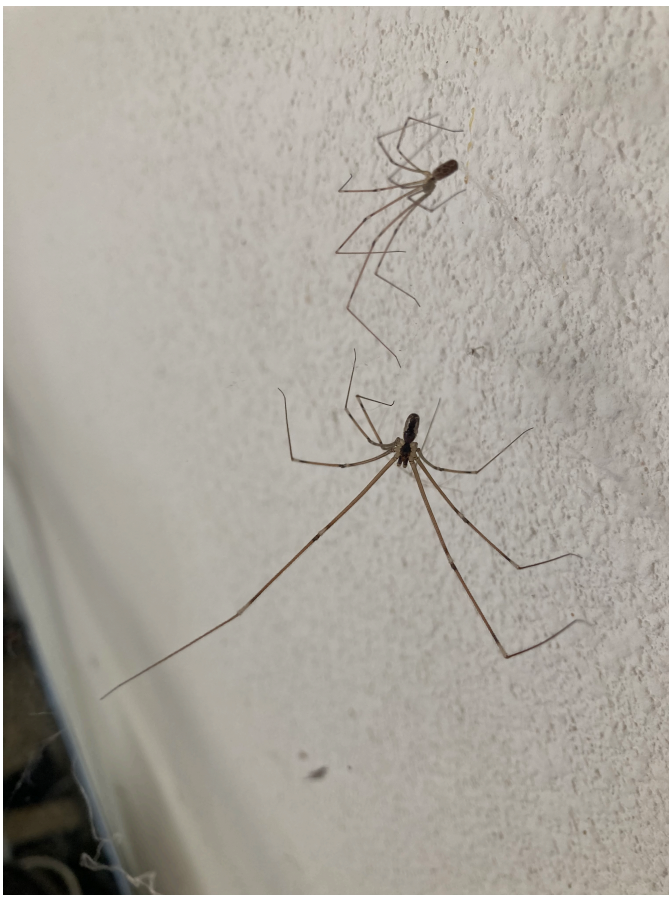
I've been working on the Lord's Prayer, trying to make some sense of it and re-write it in a way I can assent to in church. Here's how it is in the NRSV, in the book of Matthew:

Our Father in heaven,
hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come.
Your will be done,
on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
as we also have forgiven our debtors.
And do not bring us to the time of trial,
but rescue us from the evil one.
For if you forgive others their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but if you do not forgive others, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.

"Father" implies "Creator," a change the United Church of Christ sometimes makes to feel less patriarchal. As an anti-foundationalist I must have enormous problems with creation; to me, it is better described as emergence or evolution. Can we separate the process of change from materiality itself? On some level, yes; change is energy, and materiality is matter, although Einstein tells us that matter and energy are ultimately the same thing. Could God be Energy? This seems to put me in the camp of process theology. Reshaping "the Father" into "Emergence," "kingdom" is then retooled as "some future state beyond comprehension after iteration after iteration of probabilistic change," "will" is the thing unto itself, "on earth as it is in heaven" is self-reflexively calling out such a distinction as meaningless, and the rest is food (the One True God — seriously, think about it), ethics, and wrestling with our own neurotransmitters in the face of a day to day reality that is different from the one anatomically modern humans evolved to cope with ca. 300,000 years ago. There it is!

I want to close this chapter on God not so atheistically. The certainty and finality with which those with a scientific materialist worldview present it bothers many theists, and those theists have a point. We do the best we can with the cultural material we have, which is a lot at this point, and draw a fuzzy conclusion. I'm not going to tell anyone that their experienced God doesn't exist, or is dead, irrelevant, silly, primitive, or even that it is a phantom of neurology; epistemic humility is a cornerstone of a religious naturalism based on infinite regress.

I don't believe in God, but I'm afraid of him. - Verbal Kint quoting Keaton in *The Usual Suspects* (1995)



Death

I'm going to be honest with you: I ***hate*** *this place, this zoo, this prison, this reality, whatever you want to call it; I can't stand it any longer. It's the smell! If there is such a thing. I feel saturated by it. I can taste your stink and every time I do, I fear that I've somehow been infected by it. It's — it's repulsive, isn't it? I must get out of here. I must get free. And in this mind is the key, my key.* - Agent Smith in "*The Matrix*" (1999)

Why that quote? Mostly because I like Hugo Weaving's performance. But it also speaks to an all-in-consciousness worldview (that I go into more detail on later in the "Consciousness" chapter) but presents it pessimistically. Agent Smith is stuck in a reality he finds abhorrent and he's seeking an escape which may or may not be nihilistic; he's sort of like a Buddhist with a particular, metaphysical view of Nirvana: as an extinguishing of all that is, rather than just an end to suffering.

I still have many of the mp3s I got off Limewire, Kazaa, etc, in the early 2000s. They're on a 2010 iPod touch which is plugged into an even older Panasonic boom box, both destined to grow old together as they are made of the same obsolete technology. I keep it on random play. Sometimes a song plays that takes me back to the early 2000's when I was a 25 year old undergrad, smoking cigarettes in my apartment and making Macromedia Director interfaces on my Bondi iMac. I often then get a sinking feeling; something like dread, related to nostalgia and the passage of time and change in myself. I'm 51 years old now so that time in my Baltimore apartment was half my life ago. I believe that dreadful feeling when Polvo (early 2000s indie band) comes into rotation on my mp3 player is a sense of impending death. The past happened. It is the future now. Soon it will be the future with regard to the now. Then, comes death.

To me, notions of afterlife come out of the impossibility of conceptualizing our own deaths — consciousness is incapable of modeling its own nonexistence. So, then, we get things like the pearly gates, or more charitably union with God (Christianity), or "the self never dies" (Hinduism). For many people, the afterlife is the gateway into God, because it's the most compelling reason to believe in Him. If you were just going to snuff out and stop being, regardless of faith, then why assent to dogma?

But back to our universe. I don't think time will ever run out but I didn't just pull this out of my hat; there's a great Wikipedia article titled "the ultimate fate of the universe" that gives good information on what will happen at large time scales. In a few billion years the Earth will *probably* be swallowed by the sun – if not, it'll be baked into a cinder. That uncertainty is funny to me: our home may or may not be obliterated into plasma, depending on the breaks; so much for the Kingdom of God on Earth. After that, energy gradually dissipates and reaches a point

where interaction between systems is no longer possible – this is the "heat death" of the universe. Much has been written on this including a sort of well known article titled "Reality is Evil" by Drew M Dalton that I don't like inasmuch as it seems to posit we should be rolling coal rather than living in moderation and temperance because existence itself is based around this heat death and amounts to life feeding on life feeding on life. Because of this predatory destructiveness, according to Dalton, our task is to rage against the dying of the light. This is sort of an outdated and dare I say capitalistic and Western view. For one thing, Dalton doesn't account for the multiverse. I must reiterate that I don't *know* the multiverse and multi-multiverse and multi-multi-multiverse, etc – the infinite micro/macro-cosm – exists, but it seems that way to me. Maybe it doesn't seem that way to Dalton, or maybe he has a lot of testosterone and likes to fight and justifies this with a worldview that involves the necessity of struggle. Many thinkers, such as Epicurus and Buddha, would disagree.

The point is that our universe will die, just like a leaf on a tree dies, dries up, and falls off. But the tree is still there. And this is all right...death is all right. Death is just death. I got a clue on the nature of death when I was placed under general anesthetic for surgery on my broken leg and had the strange experience of a ringing in my ears, my eyes closing involuntarily, and then opening them back up after supposedly four hours had passed – this is what I was told but it seemed instantaneous. Those four hours just vanished, like the untold aeons after your death will vanish. Time dissolves into nothing from your perspective, but from God's perspective, the universe slowly fades into less and less energetic states, but – and this is key – it never actually dies. We can take an analogy from a calculus limit: our universe will approach zero energy but never actually get to zero energy, and in the meantime, as you look closer and closer at those increasingly isolated elementary particles, each of them would be found to each contain multiple universes and beyond. So not even the ultimate death brings true death.

But a lot of years are going to pass after you die. And everything that happens, including particle motion in your brain, leaves a kind of record against the fabric of the universe, nudging spacetime itself. Who is to say what will happen before heat death? Maybe the universe itself, or even the multi-multi-verse, will evolve into a singular consciousness that can or will or must include all of that information on who you were and eternally are. Maybe you will live again. Maybe your eyes will close, all that time will vanish as the four hours did for me under general anesthesia, and you will wake up in heaven as part of some singular consciousness. Vegas odds are as of yet uncalculated (no incoming bets).

Nondualsim, in the Hindu and Western new age sense, is not merely the proposition that the universe or multiverse or cosmos is fundamentally made of one substance, such as energy, but specifically that the consciousness that we all feel — the sense of being you and of looking out from behind a pair of eyes — is equivalent to this root substance, whatever it may "be." This is extended into "consciousness is all there is," a position echoed by Western nondualists like David Godman, Peter Russel, or Rupert Spira, and the flavor or spirit of their assertion is very similar to theistic insistence that God exists, both in form and in content; "yeah but God is beyond that" vs "yeah but that takes place within consciousness," when confronted with all of physics. So it's a kind of rhetorical immunity that smacks of Last Thursdayism[6] in its irrefutability and unfalsifiability.

Nisargadatta Maharaj, an Indian guru of the 20th century whom I like because he's fairly undogmatic when it comes to his nondualism, tells us that death is a myth. What does he mean?

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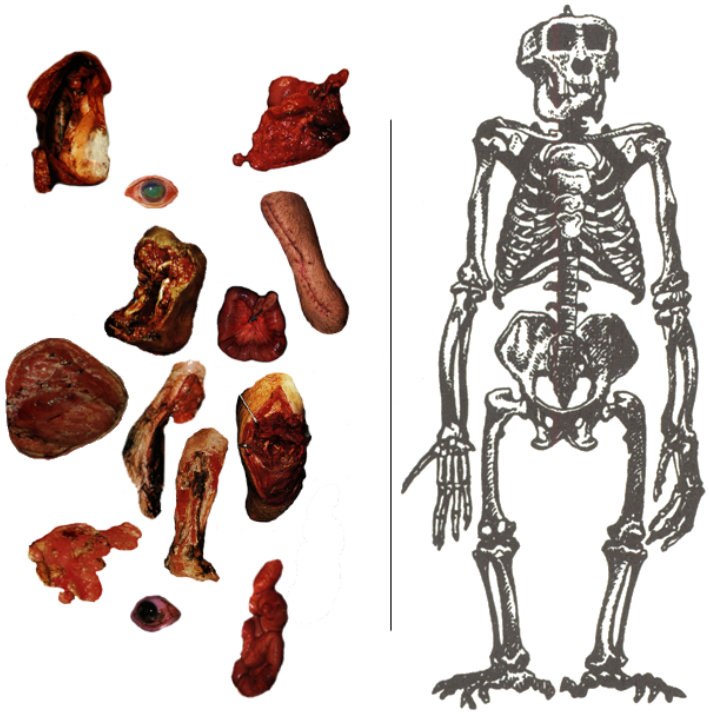
[6] The cosmos was created Last Thursday, and all evidence to the contrary (including memories of Last Wednesday) was planted — this is possible, and impossible to disprove, but most would probably intuit that it is unlikely; "simulation theory" (this lived conscious experience is an alien computer simulation) is in the same boat.

Since the consciousness you feel is the same as Brahman, the universal consciousness, the death of your body is existentially insignificant. He would not deny that vision, the quiet sense of being you apart from verbal thought and strong perception you get while meditating, memories, reasoning, and all of the neurological events associated with being alive, are going to go away. So I think death does mean something, although maybe it's not as big a deal as some people make it to be; it's not a non-event, although from an outside perspective the death of a single organism, whether it is a cell, a leaf, a tree, a person, or even an entire species, is a small change if you zoom out enough. But even though we may be suspended on a continuum of being at an arbitrary point, our current reality feels very significant to us. I'm here, now. One day I won't be here, now, but that's an abstraction and not something that I will ever be able to comprehend. "You and death will never meet," says Norm Macdonald. Maybe he read this somewhere but it would be delightful if it were his own idea.

"Death" is the hardest chapter in some sense; all the others are pretty easy, relatively speaking: Consciousness? A double-mirror illusion stemming from the brain thinking about itself, but regarding it as fundamental is an aid in meditation. God? A neurological structure that is experienced as true even if not-true from a materialist perspective, and that most importantly is useful. The others are filler/fluff. But death? The difficulty comes from the fact that, as Norm Macdonald and his sources imply, death is a sort of non-event; all we can do is think about death while we are alive. This might produce anxiety or lead to enlightenment, depending on one's proclivities; 20th century Indian guru of nondualism Ramana Maharshi brought on his experience of Moksha, enlightenment, self realization, etc, by confronting the notion that he was going to die and the impossibility or paradox of this conception.

Naturalistically, the death of a human is best seen as the death of a leaf on a tree — a nondestructive change in the whole, greater organism. This is not to imply that one should not mourn but only that, as the Red Hot Chili Peppers say,

Pain's part of life
Don't hide behind your false pride
It's a lie
Your lie
If you see me gettin' mighty
If you see me gettin' high
Knock me down
I'm not bigger than life



This chapter stank. It was full of disjointed and repetitive showing off, pasted in from my old blog: seeing through and past nondualism, through and past Buddhism, through and past Daniel Dennett, and conjuring my own idea of what consciousness *actually* is. So, I deleted it all, and left only an essay I wrote in one sitting, prompted by ChatGPT (opposite day!). But there's one thing I wanted to say that I didn't below: religion seems to be divided into the metaphysicians and the phenomenologists. In other words, people who think that the map does not equal the territory, and those that think the map must include the territory to a degree — that the map is on the map, so to speak. When I put it that way it shifts me more into the phenomenologist camp but spiritual wisdom always seems to state that the middle path is truest (although beware the middle ground fallacy).

It's hopeless, and I'm not going to get anywhere that hasn't been gotten-to before, which is in part why I deleted five or so pages of mostly citing famous nondual Hindus and explaining why they are wrong. To a degree it was all triggered by the irksome theological certainty of various devotees of European descent. I don't think anyone needs to read that. Right?

But let me explain more about metaphysics vs phenomenology, starting with definitions. Metaphysics is how things actually are, out there in the world, and including you, of course, because what you take to be "you" is a function of your brain. Nondualists would disagree but to heck with them, for now. Phenomenology is what takes place in your mind, including the input of your senses and the processing thereof. And, by definition, from the standpoint of experience, this includes everything! It cannot be any other way. But now nudging me into the metaphysics camp is that "the world is my idea" seems much like a fish believing the world it sees outside to

be painted on its bowl — just intuitively untenable, a bit like Last Thursdayism. But do you see how the definition of each must include the other?

And now without further ado:

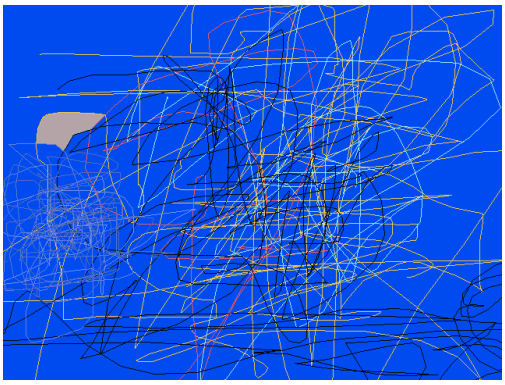
Write an essay exploring the idea of "self-awareness" in the context of modern life. Consider its significance for personal growth, decision-making, and mental well-being. How does self-awareness intersect with the constant distractions of technology, social media, and modern work environments? Reflect on ways to cultivate and maintain self-awareness in a world that often prioritizes external achievement over internal reflection.

Here I am back in high school, writing my college admission essay. Is there some clever way I can begin that does not put "self-awareness" as the first word?

First of all, what I really want to write about is something deeper than what GPT might be implying with terms like "personal growth" and "decision making" and "mental well being." But, I also want to write about how shallower interpretations of self awareness are similar to deeper philosophical or spiritual interpretations of consciousness.

We are treading in semantically difficult waters; not everyone knows what you are talking about if you try to bring up "consciousness;" I have experienced this firsthand. But, maybe it doesn't have to be that complicated — if you practice good manners in a restaurant, is that "self awareness"? I think so. Maybe chewing with your mouth closed is not such a far cry from deep mediation on some grand hinduistic notion of self, because they both involve an inward-turning of the brain.

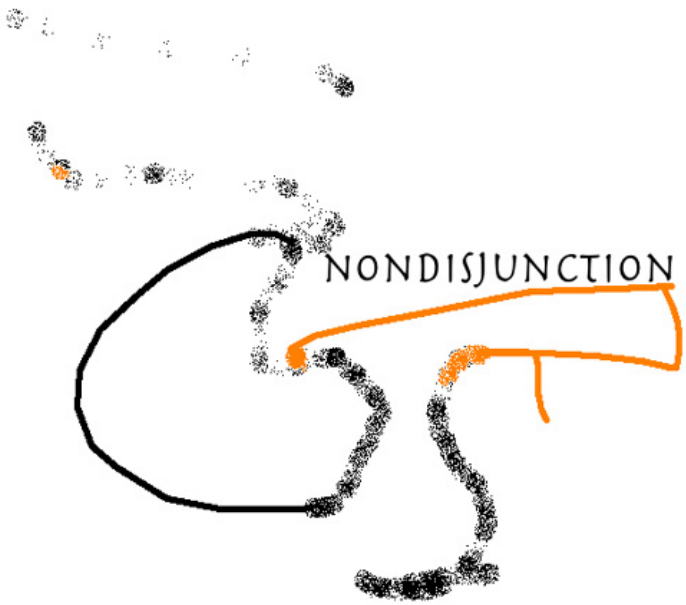
Scientific materialism is gouged with an obvious gaping hole: consciousness. By that, in this case, in this usage, I mean something like: the feeling of being you, of looking out from behind a pair of eyes. But here we run into trouble in a Daniel Dennett'ish kind of way: people might tend to conflate vision and other perceptions with a grand ineffable notion of consciousness that hints at some metaphysical ultimate or absolute. If you close your eyes, don't hear anything, smell anything, etc, then what remains is what Ramana Maharshi et al refer to as "pure awareness." But, I suspect that that sense of self is just another sense, no more valorized than vision or smell or proprioception (balance and body position).



Why does consciousness amount to a problem for scientific materialism? Because something seems special about consciousness (or self awareness) that is difficult or impossible to explain with atoms and energy. Maybe it's a kind of strange loop that results from the brain focusing on itself. Funny thing about the magical mystery of consciousness is, it seems to vanish when you write or talk about it, like a star that is brighter when you look off to its side. It's tempting to go "welp, we ain't gonna solve this one!" and move on with your life, but that amounts to an unexamined life and someone said a life like that is not worth living. David Godman, Ramana devotee, similarly tells us that if you don't at least try to "realize the self" then you've wasted your life. So in writing this essay, and in all my other meanderings about consciousness and the like, I engage proactively in non-life wasting.

Here are some presuppositions for my arrival at a version of panpsychism, such that 1) consciousness exists everywhere, but only importantly manifests when a complex and energized

structure is there, and 2) consciousness is not a force or fluid or separate thing from materiality — it is simply how materiality behaves.



The brain isn't magical. If you duplicated its structure even with artificial materials I am extremely confident that this duplicate would experience itself in a similar way that humans do.

There's clearly a continuum of complexity, with humans and other primates, cetaceans, corvids, and pachyderms at the top, moving down to canids to felids (!) to rodents to arthropods to bacteria. They say a crow is about as bright as a 5 year old human child.

Animals do not appear to have our neurological language structures. Hindu and New Age notions of consciousness purport that the language running through our heads constitutes "thoughts" and is not the "true self." Simply the brain, existing, such that it would be perceptually aware if there were anything to perceive, is the natural state, and the goal, and Brahman. So, animals are already there, because they have no language-based thoughts! Maybe the complexity of the human brain is a hinderance to "true" consciousness.

So, self awareness (or consciousness) appears to be a property of the universe, or at least of complex energized systems residing therein, such as animal brains. There might be ways to be conscious other than ways animals on earth appear to be; maybe plants, trees, fungal networks, planets, stars, galaxies, the universe itself, and the multiverse if that exists, are conscious and are entities that can somehow "think" or "be aware" — just not precisely in the way we humans do.

I don't want to get carried away with the deeper implications of consciousness, that not everyone seems to be able to even see or talk about, in part because I'm not convinced I can communicate about it clearly; did I really succeed in explaining why consciousness and scientific materialism are at odds? Heck no. The other end of the continuum of consciousness (or "self awareness") is, as I said, something like "Miss Manners," in which you are aware of what you are currently doing; don't absent-mindedly pick your nose in public. But as I said, I think these two ends are intimately, inextricably, importantly, conflatedly, related.

Somewhere between these two ends (The True Brahmanistic Self that is God Itself, and picking your nose in public) might be pretending you are another person who is watching you. What would that person observe? In the context of modern life, as GPT queried, this might amount to Kantian ethics or the Golden

Rule: conducting yourself in such a way that someone nearby with a similar brain could and would and should tolerate, or even appreciate.

They say that "focus" or "concentration" is fundamental or near-fundamental...or at least very important, conceptually, to the whole consciousness and self-awareness subject I am fluttering around. Taking away metaphysics, meditation simply exercises your concentration muscles, like going to the gym works your lats, so you can then focus on the evening movie better and not check your phone so much. So in a way, ADHD is a disease of unspirituality.

I suppose the way to better self awareness is the modern trope-approaching-cliche of "mindfulness," which is often not quite explained for reasons similar to the discussion of consciousness being problematic: no matter what you say, some people are going to interpret it differently. It's relatively easy to be mindful, or stay in the consciousness, or focus on self awareness, when you are in your meditation chair and not much else is going on. It's quite another matter to extend this to challenging sensory and social environments like the workplace or school or family life. But, supposedly, it can be done, and should be done: you can "stay mindful" when your spouse is yelling at you, when you drop a dish and break it, and when your house is burning down (theoretically).

Does everyone know what I mean when I talk about quiet meditative awareness? About focusing on your own inner experience? And about potentially turning this act into a constant state of being? The problem could be a matter of not getting it, a matter of not doing it, or both. What's interesting is that many well-read smart people who are engaged productively, actively, and perhaps consumingly with the world must have a way of encapsulating all of the foregoing just as a part of general cultural knowledge. How do they do it? "The whole present moment consciousness enlightenment thing," and then they move on to other projects?

Church

When I was a kid I loved illustrated encyclopedic dinosaur, nature, and engineering books — sort of a stamp collecting impulse: here is reality, and it's compartmentalized into a set you can hold in your head and re-create yourself with markers and paper, very much like the periodic table is a simple chart that represents our entire universe. If I had had such a book that imprisoned and labeled all of the world's religions, it probably would have made a big impression, for better or for worse.

Religion	Features	Bugs	Score	Would it work?
Bahá'í	Acknowledgement of the legitimacy of all religions inasmuch as they point in the right direction	Deceptively dogmatic in its strict theism, cultish American celebrity thing going on	7.5/10	Of course
Buddhism	Salvation is practical and doable	Full of metaphysical holes*, confusing, sneaky, often more supernaturalistic than it lets on	8/10	Of course
Christianity	Brings God closer to humankind, ethics of love and care — especially for the marginalized	Historically and scientifically implausible or impossible, not much room for introverts, omits a theology of consciousness	7/10	Of course
Hinduism	Loose, postmodern, there's so much to it you can probably find what you are looking for	Ungrounded, nonexistent/ polymorphic, conflated with Indian history and culture	7/10	Of course
Islam	Makes God greater than you can imagine, takes itself seriously, fosters humility	Uncompromising, ferocious, Mohammed (PBUH) as the end of history	7/10	Of course
Judaism	Flexible, intellectual, comforting	Tribalism and exclusivity can be problematic, overly text-centered (language is taken as reality)	8/10	Of course
Sikhism	Combines monotheism and pantheism in an almost-coherent way, noble, charitable	Looks like a compromise between Hinduism and Islam which is sort of hamfisted, rituals can feel rigid and deliberately alienating	8/10	Of course
Taoism	Science-friendly and naturalistic, peaceful, deterministic, beautiful	Local practices can be primitive and weird, the shape of the Tao itself suggests dualism, so vague it sort of disappears	9/10	Of course
Unitarian Universalism	Solves the problem for people who want church but don't believe in anything too specific	Can feel pointless, political conformity and intolerance, Christian cultural baggage	9/10	Of course

*The Four Noble Holes, with possible exit strategies: 1) No-self (anatta) contradicts rebirth — rebirth would require a nonphysical human essence of some kind to transmit, unless rebirth amounts only to cultural and other non-supernatural influences and the general shape of a single reality. 2) Compassion and detachment are in obvious conflict unless you remain detached *in order to act* with effective compassion, e.g., avoid becoming beside yourself with

grief. 3) Should we kill the Buddha or take refuge in the Buddha? "Kill the Buddha" is mostly specific to Zen Buddhism and not other sects; furthermore how much reverence the Buddha gets before it interferes with more essential elements is an ongoing ecclesiastical balancing act. 4) Nirvana taken as nihilistic death cult; why would we want the whole thing to end? The solution is to regard Nirvana soteriologically (the end of suffering) rather than metaphysically (the end of existence). Told you...slippery; Buddhist strategy when confronted with logical issues has always been to reply "yes," and there is some truth to the trope of a cultural/conceptual mismatch between Western particularlist technocentrism and Eastern "everything is everything" postmodernistic discourse...man.

We are at a crossroads, says the goofy new ager. No but seriously...this is an important time, much like any other time, from its beginning on up to now (I don't think time will ever run out but I could be wrong). What makes our time now (2025 AD) unique is knowledge – we have easy access to at least a summary snapshot of all of human history, text, and culture, and can theoretically integrate it all into a cohesive system for being, living in the world, talking to each other, caring for creation, and so on.

When I say "we" I'm mostly talking about human beings, those language-centered bipedal mostly-hairless (most of us, anyway) primates with our incessant meaning-makers, stomachs, arms and legs, and eyes, whom I and so many others have such trouble dealing with. But, I'm also talking about something I would maybe call "The Church." I know this sounds far-out and it's really the only sci-fi idea in this text: "The Church" is a virtual gathering of all sentient beings in the multiverse and beyond who at any given moment are thinking about each other, and thinking about each other as that other thinks about still more others – a community of consciousness across space (and maybe time). I can sense the new age allergies kicking in here.

Let me use an aside here to address those allergies in more detail. In school I did my final work on "the look of math" – I tried to get some meaning and text out of art's relationship to mathematics. Sometimes advisors reacted with something like "are you really qualified to be doing this work?" Yes and no. I am ridiculously bad at math; 84 - 37 = ? remains a mystery of

the universe, like dark matter. But, I enjoyed finally somewhat understanding math and getting the problems right as an undergrad, and I appreciate the philosophy of math. In modern universities fine art is married to culture studies, or, the un-rigorous study of everything on culture studies' own terms – culture studies purports to understand everything while actually understanding nothing, but in some sense, it understands everything. Trying to learn math, I saw things like limits and how they approach infinity but never get there, and how that approximation taken as a whole can be the same thing as the thing it is approaching. I remember trigonometry feeling transcendental in the way it all works out so perfectly as if it were itself a living organism; it inspired Pythagoras to start a religion based on that perceived organizational order, which is something Christianity, with its syncretic merger of Judaic and Greek ideas, terms "the Logos" (or the word of God). So no, I don't have an academic background in theology or science, or training as a writer and thinker beyond having written papers and held conversations in and around the modern expanded definition of "art." But I can step back and see "big pictures" relatively clearly and this is what I want to share with the world.

I am as sure extraterrestrial life exists as I am sure the sun will rise tomorrow. Here some calculation is useful. Our own Milky Way galaxy, as we rest in the corner of one of its great spiral arms, is made up of between 100 and 400 billion stars. A billion is a thousand million. A million is a thousand thousand. Moving up, there are between 200 billion and 2 trillion (another factor of a thousand beyond a billion) galaxies in the observable universe. How big is the universe beyond that? We don't know, but here's a clue: our universe is said to be "flat." In other words, it's Euclidian and a straight line drawn in it remains straight no matter how far it goes; the lines making up an equilateral triangle remain the same length, unlike if one were to draw this triangle on the surface of a sphere. But, this flatness comes with an important caveat: a fraction-of-a-percent margin of error. This might mean that our universe isn't flat but is just so big that it appears *almost* flat within our scope of observation, but is in fact finite and curved such that if you keep going you eventually get back to where you started. Some people say it might be torus (donut) shaped – a finite but huge bubble without edges.

Let's do a grandiose calculation and say that this bubble we are in of the observable universe which has been calculated at 93 billion light years across – not miles, but *light years* (how far light travels in a year, as it speeds along at 186,282 miles per second) – is .04% of the actual size of our universe. 93 is .04% of what number? 233 trillion.[7]

I'm saying for the purpose of this argument that our universe is 233 trillion light years across. If there are, on average, 1 trillion galaxies in that .04% we know, then there are 2.5 quadrillion galaxies in our universe. Say 250 billion stars per galaxy. That yields 625,000,000,000,000,000,000,000, or 625 septillion stars in total. Most stars have planets; 70% to 100%. Of those planets some are earth-like, we know, but in fact a minority (finally some subtraction): 2% to 20%, say men in white coats, so we'll go with 11% like a fair arbiter. So only about 70 septillion earth-like planets. Boo. And it gets worse: more subtraction. This is likely controversial and certainly speculative, but I believe life is an inevitability – if a planet is earth-like (land, water, and air as well as day and night), then *some* kind of life will evolve there. But, how much of this life evolves into sophonts that worry about getting too fat and post about this on the internet? That's where the subtraction gets potentially brutal. All things considered – magnetic fields, solar flares, tectonic plates, etc – it might be a very small percentage. Microbial life is probably common out there, but Blue Whales? Not so much. All in all, given those

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[7] In fact I have no earthly idea about this reckless assertion. I intuit that our universe is much bigger than the observable universe, because the latter is a sphere with the earth at its center. I calculated the diameter of our entire universe by dividing 93 billion by .0004, based on the .04% margin of error of the non-curvature of detectable spacetime, then converted light years to miles; your mileage again may vary.

uncountable numbers above, and given the grim reality that our earth might be a very rare gem indeed with preciously specific conditions, you arrive at maybe 0-100 technological civilizations per galaxy at any given moment. There's chance, although unlikely, that we humans are alone in the Milky Way. Oddly, and sort of religiously, the first two out of the three closest stars to us, constituting the triple system of Alpha Centauri A, Alpha Centauri B, and Proxima Centauri, all at about 4.37 light years (or 25.7 trillion miles) away, just so happen to be two of the few (5-10) visible stars in the night sky that could harbor earth-like planets. Our fastest spacecraft at the time of this writing would take a mere 6,700 years to get there if it magically travelled at top speed the whole trip. Voyager would float there in about 75,000 years, and New Horizons in about 90,000.

But back to gargantuan numbers: let's say 50 civilizations per galaxy. Multiply that by the number of galaxies in the entire universe as I've proposed it, and we get 125 quadrillion, or 125,000,000,000,000,000, or 125×10^{15}, tech civilizations, or potential members of the church, at any given moment. But then we have to calculate how many sentients per planet are actually in the church – are actually thinking about all the other beings out there who are themselves thinking about other beings. It might be a small number but it can't be zero, especially if you factor in time; I'm not that unique and other people on earth have thought of this before, I hope. This might be the most brutal subtraction of all, and it's sort of similar to the number of civilizations in a galaxy at any given moment. Just for fun let's make it the same number: 0-100, so on average, 50. 50 people out of 9 billion on earth that have thought about this — but that are thinking about it now? It might be 0-1, or even smaller than one; maybe .01 or even .001 people. But .0001% of 125 quadrillion is still a big number. On a good day our church might have 125,000,000 members. I could be off by a lot somewhere, but even if I am I think I can infer that the church exists.

I just remembered – that's for our universe only. For the multiverse and unknowable cosmos, there might be an infinite number of church members. I have some difficulty imagining consciousness as you go down in size (are individual cells conscious? Atoms? etc) but it may be that "consciousness" is sort of a restrictive concept and we tend to see it as human neurological consciousness whereas in actuality is it much broader. I'm making stuff up, as usual.

But what if *the whole thing* is conscious? We are entities that have consciousness, and together we make up "society" or "the species" – Jung talked about the collective consciousness. But beyond that, what if the planet earth is itself conscious in some way? Or the galaxy? Or our universe? It might function like a brain, with galaxies being like neurons that somehow communicate by nudging spacetime itself in same manner as its ongoing expansion; we tend to restrict the domain of "consciousness" to "human neurological consciousness."

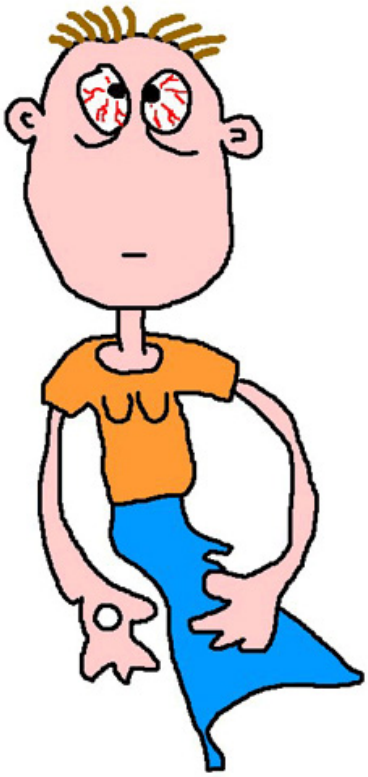
On a related note, star gods might be listening.

Nothing can move faster than light. But the one thing that does "travel" faster than light is space itself; space is expanding at a "rate" far beyond the speed of light, such that there are parts of the universe that can never be informationally accessible to us via radiation, gravity, light, etc — conventional energies, none of which can travel faster than ~186,000 miles per second. If you could "nudge space" — poke it somehow — then that minute change in spatial expansion might be detected huge distances away, with no speed of light restrictions. Maybe all energies, particles, waves, etc, when they move, do a bit of this nudging, and the right kind of sensitive equipment is required to detect the nudging elsewhere. Human thoughts are electro-chemical processes and as such would be detectable in this way — they would nudge space.

So the star gods just have to be listening for me not to feel alone — for that psychological sense that someone is listening or watching to be true, and not just amount to NSA metadata. When I say "star gods" I'm talking about entities so advanced that they seem like Bronze Age gods to us;

technology indistinguishable from magic, basically. It's possible that such things exist. The observable universe is a bubble with us — Earth — at the exact center, and we do not and cannot know what is beyond it (unless we learn how to detect nudges in space). Imagine a pen pal in some distant galaxy to which you can never travel; with spacenudging (tm) you could carry on a Skype call with some tentacled beast ("Skype! Now with SpaceNudging!").

Sometimes it occurs to me that it's sort of weird that this what we see — a big inky black void with the occasional star surrounded by planets, and it's all made up of the 92 or so naturally occurring chemical elements — seems sort of weirdly "specific" for All That Is. If the big bang had gone differently, that pure energy at the start could have shaped up any number of different ways: maybe elsewhere there aren't protons and neutrons bonded together with electrons orbiting them, but something else entirely. Maybe there isn't gravity but something else entirely. Etc.



My favorite way to conceptualized our universe is as finite, but without edges, such that you could conceivably move far enough in one direction and end up at the same place you started, because space itself starts to warp. I don't see how other universes could be accessible to us; spacenudging doesn't translate into entirely other realities. Furthermore the only reasons I have for thinking there may be other universes are 1) scifi tropes, and relatedly 2) that aforementioned suspicious specificity. It's weird to me that hydrogen, helium, lithium, beryllium, etc, are all that there are; it seems like a very tight and bounded configuration to account for "the cosmos," or all that is, or whatever you want to call existence beyond this thing in front of our faces, which amounts to rocks and gas bubbles orbiting stars in a giant finite bubble without edges. There just has to be more to it than that.

Maybe the star gods know something about it. If star gods are reading this, I would like to have my consciousness transferred, such that I still felt like "me" and there was no notion of loss or death, into an android with infinite or practically-infinite toughness and strength, plus computational "brain" powers billions or trillions or more times what human beings are endowed with. Probably this would involve micro-mechanical subatomic structures, not to do your job for you. And no "monkeys paw" malarky where I end up with no volition or uninterested in people, like Dr. Manhattan; make it go well. Thanks! Plus I want to be able to undo it if it turns out I don't like it.

If there aren't other universes and this is all that there is, then that would lend a new order of religious importance to material reality. This is it! And maybe the aforementioned "specificity" — the seemingly bounded nature of everything — is more a function of our perceptions and brains than the way things really are. Or, it's just the building blocks, and it's up to us to make more complicated and interesting things. I dunno.

While we're on the subject I should mention the tictacs (UFOs or UAP that the US military has video footage of). Tictacs could be one or both of two things: 1) extra-terrestrial technology that exists on earth, or 2) someone or some group of humans has somehow completely outstripped all other human technological development by tremendous magnitudes. The second possibility seems unlikely, considering that it's hard or impossible to keep technological secrets for long

and nations tend to be just about on par with each other, racing to edge out their peers (consider WW2 and nukes). I suppose the tictacs could be 3), a massive conspiratorial lie by the government in preparation for some new world order clamp down ("Hey! There are aliens. Take this pill!"). I had an "a-ha!" moment when I heard Joe Rogan, known extraterrestrial enthusiast, expressing skepticism at the tictacs being alien technology simply because the government has said "we don't know what these things are;" therefor they must be Area 51 super weapons, etc. This is the conspiratorial mind at work: thinking a malevolent or at least dishonest "elite" is in charge and whatever they say, the opposite is true. I've seen this worldview enough now to recognize it.

I think the tictacs are drones that have been on earth for a very long time — billions of years, maybe — and they may not know what they are either. In order for them to have gotten here, they would have had to have travelled here from some other place in the universe and as such would have made a very long journey indeed. But if they are drones — certainly drones with some intelligence — this is doable...they don't run out of patience. Once they land, they observe, and use spacenudging to transmit back to their origin, which is most likely some kind of advanced civilization or aspect of one. Another possibility is that some alien "nudged" or even used normal EM radiation to bring tictacs into existence, using that nudging or radiation to bump a few quarks or strings or whatever into guided action, and then a natural process of evolution slowly builds them, over some period of time and out of pre-existing matter and energy on earth.

By the way: if I were an alien programming a drone, I'd tell it to hide itself on the ocean floor. Maybe there's a whole school of them down there.

The next step for us is to use a tictac to talk to its alien masters, by gently capturing one with a net. I am guessing the technology would be quite unfathomable — something like the aforementioned subatomic micro-mechanical structures. Basically what I mean by that is, using the energies in quarks and strings, and in things we don't have a name for, to power computation and movement; imagine a *tiny* circuit board or a *tiny* piston-and-gearbox, and imagine splitting a proton into quarks like we now split an atom into protons and neutrons. Maybe it'd be something like the T1000 metalloid Terminator from *T2* (1991): we capture one of the tictac drones, crack it open, and it just looks like a solid substance on the inside. "Oh. Back to the drawing board."

The amount of power you could get from micro-mechanics would seem practically infinite from our perspective, which is why I'm holding out hope for my infinitely strong, infinitely tough, infinitely smart android plan. Any day now, guys, would be fine. But no probably they can't do that, because the tictacs don't have that capability. All they can do is observe and transmit, and easily escape fighter jets with fantastic-seeming subatomic power and processing. We'll never actually meet the tictacs' masters face to face, but we might have a Skype call with them[8].

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[8] Quantum entanglement seems to suggest that information could travel faster than light — if you nudge an electron on Pluto then its entangled brother on Earth wiggles instantly. But I read it does not work that way, and any kind of faster-than-light information transfer would violate causality and as such "information" gathered from entanglement is necessarily randomized. Spacenudgeing might fail in the same way. Back to the drawing board...

A Nod to Chemistry

Group ▸ / Period ▾	1	2		3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
																			Noble gases
Nonmetals 1	1 H																		2 He
Metals 2	3 Li	4 Be												5 B	6 C	7 N	8 O	9 F	10 Ne
3	11 Na	12 Mg												13 Al	14 Si	15 P	16 S	17 Cl	18 Ar
4	19 K	20 Ca		21 Sc	22 Ti	23 V	24 Cr	25 Mn	26 Fe	27 Co	28 Ni	29 Cu	30 Zn	31 Ga	32 Ge	33 As	34 Se	35 Br	36 Kr
5	37 Rb	38 Sr		39 Y	40 Zr	41 Nb	42 Mo	43 Tc	44 Ru	45 Rh	46 Pd	47 Ag	48 Cd	49 In	50 Sn	51 Sb	52 Te	53 I	54 Xe
6	55 Cs	56 Ba	La to Yb	71 Lu	72 Hf	73 Ta	74 W	75 Re	76 Os	77 Ir	78 Pt	79 Au	80 Hg	81 Tl	82 Pb	83 Bi	84 Po	85 At	86 Rn
7	87 Fr	88 Ra	Ac to No	103 Lr	104 Rf	105 Db	106 Sg	107 Bh	108 Hs	109 Mt	110 Ds	111 Rg	112 Cn	113 Nh	114 Fl	115 Mc	116 Lv	117 Ts	118 Og
	s-block (plus He)		f-block	d-block										p-block (excluding He)					
Lanthanides				57 La	58 Ce	59 Pr	60 Nd	61 Pm	62 Sm	63 Eu	64 Gd	65 Tb	66 Dy	67 Ho	68 Er	69 Tm	70 Yb		
Actinides				89 Ac	90 Th	91 Pa	92 U	93 Np	94 Pu	95 Am	96 Cm	97 Bk	98 Cf	99 Es	100 Fm	101 Md	102 No		

Transition metals (sometimes excluding group 12)

Some elements near the dashed staircase are sometimes called *metalloids*

Chemistry is the central science, or that's what they always say. Centrality is spiritually weighty, and I have not yet mentioned or touched on chemistry in this purportedly spiritual work. To some degree this text is about science and the philosophy of science – about how real knowledge can give us a hint about ultimate knowledge. In other words, how science can give us a religion.

I touch on biology with cells and leaves and trees and the way we can easily *see* within the physical, non-conceptual, Newtonian realm — how things are and how they behave. Biology is the ticket in; it's what we do best in a sense and it is grounded in the structure of our bodies themselves. I touch on physics, albeit conceptual physics, in discussions around elementary particles, atoms, and the Planck length. Astronomy is an obvious one. But chemistry is weird; I have always liked chemistry and I want to get something out of it here.

Specifically, I like how chemistry is bounded – in biology there are things we don't know about, in the speculative realm of astrobiology as well as the mere fact that not every species of flora or fauna has been discovered, let alone exhaustively studied. Likewise in physics we have an open end in what might be beyond or composite to the Planck scale, and even before that we run into conceptual issues like mass without size and size without mass. Then there are upsetting paradigm shifters they keep quiet til you're a grad student, such as quantum field theory, which, in my limited lego brick intuitive understanding, amounts to every elementary particle being not a "thing" so much as a ripple in one of many "fields," which are themselves unexplainable other than as mathematical objects. The point is that physics pokes at the unknown and the unknowable. But chemistry is in the middle, and while you can look at things in chemistry more closely and still make discoveries or improvements, the edges of the discipline are set. This kind of finitude is somehow reassuring and comforting if not a little philosophically pedestrian,

which might be why chemists seem to be to be a bit more grounded and humble than other scientists.

What even *is* chemistry, dude? Well...atoms, basically; the periodic table. In *Man of Steel* (2021), we hear Clark Kent's father describe a meteorite as made of stuff "not on the periodic table;" I imagine a few chemists in the audience raised their eyebrows at this. Similarly, I had a friend in undergrad who was a math major and a spiritual person, as a lot of math people seem to be. But he seemed to think that "the sky was the limit" when it came to what could physically manifest in our universe, an assertion I balked at then and still do. What I'm getting at is that this universe is less mysterious than people might often think — it's basically spacetime, full of stars, clustered roughly together into galaxies. Most of these stars give birth to planets and some of those planets have good conditions for life to arise, and on a small number of those life evolves into sophonts, the cultures of which are complex. But if you zoom out, the universe is sort of all the same. Now I remember that my undergraduate math friend was thinking

specifically about other forms of life in our universe and how they might be radically different from us or even incomprehensible to us. I like the impulse, but I think he placed it in the wrong realm; inside our universe, there are 92 commonly occurring "natural" elements, categorized by number of protons. Oxygen is extremely effective as a final electron acceptor in the electron transport chain, enabling mitochondria (the powerhouses of the cell!) to produce energy. Other advanced planetary life in our universe probably all breathes oxygen, eats biomatter, manipulates their environment with arms or tentacles or whatever, and maintains an elaborate fantasy world including comic books and religious screeds. Beyond our 1,348,500,000,000,000,000,000,000,000 (1.3 octillion) mile-wide torus-bubble without edges, it's a different story. I'm tempted to believe that my math major friend meant this (outside our universe) when he was in his speculative imagination; there's modern conflation of "the cosmos," which I take to be "all that is," with "the universe," which is the inky black void full of stars we can see at night. So in that sense chemistry is the science of our universe and will give the firmest grip on grounded, codified, bounded knowledge of this universe that it is possible to receive — it is a mature and complete discipline and as such if I had a do-over plus a better brain I might opt to study it in college. You can go deeper and further with the things that make up

atoms and at the things atoms make up, as well as speculate beyond the Planck length and beyond the observable universe and postulate composite structure, as I have done, but grounded in the here and now and with a thundering finality is the field of modern chemistry. I bought a "For Dummies" book but it's tough; maybe I'll give it another try some day soon.

Chemistry is a good place to stop along the line of existence — it is where we are suspended, approximately, and by "we" I suppose I mean "we and our easily accessible perceptions" rather than simply our bodies (biology might be a better rest stop if the latter were solely the consideration). So from there we can set up camp and send out feelers into other realms, which we have done, and will continue to do.

It's perplexing that there is not much in the way of the philosophy of chemistry; math and physics and biology don't share that absence. I think there could be productive "middle path" or even buddhistic discourse around chemistry that is heretofore mostly unexplored. Chemistry binds our universe together. I talk about the multiverse and other realities on up the chain of cellular recursion but those structures and processes are unavailable to us and will remain so without unforeseen radical leaps in technology. In the meantime, look up and see Rigel, Betelgeuse, Pollux, Castor, and Arcturus, in which hydrogen is fused into helium, yielding enough energy to shine powerfully at us from unfathomable distances. Chemistry is a fine line down the middle: atoms. One small step away in either direction and you are in another domain.

So What?

Postmodern anti-foundational pantheistic naturalism gets its religiosity from the juxtaposition of:

1) the centrality of the self as it resides at an unprivileged point on the continuum of the micro/macro-cosm, with infinite structure above and below

and...

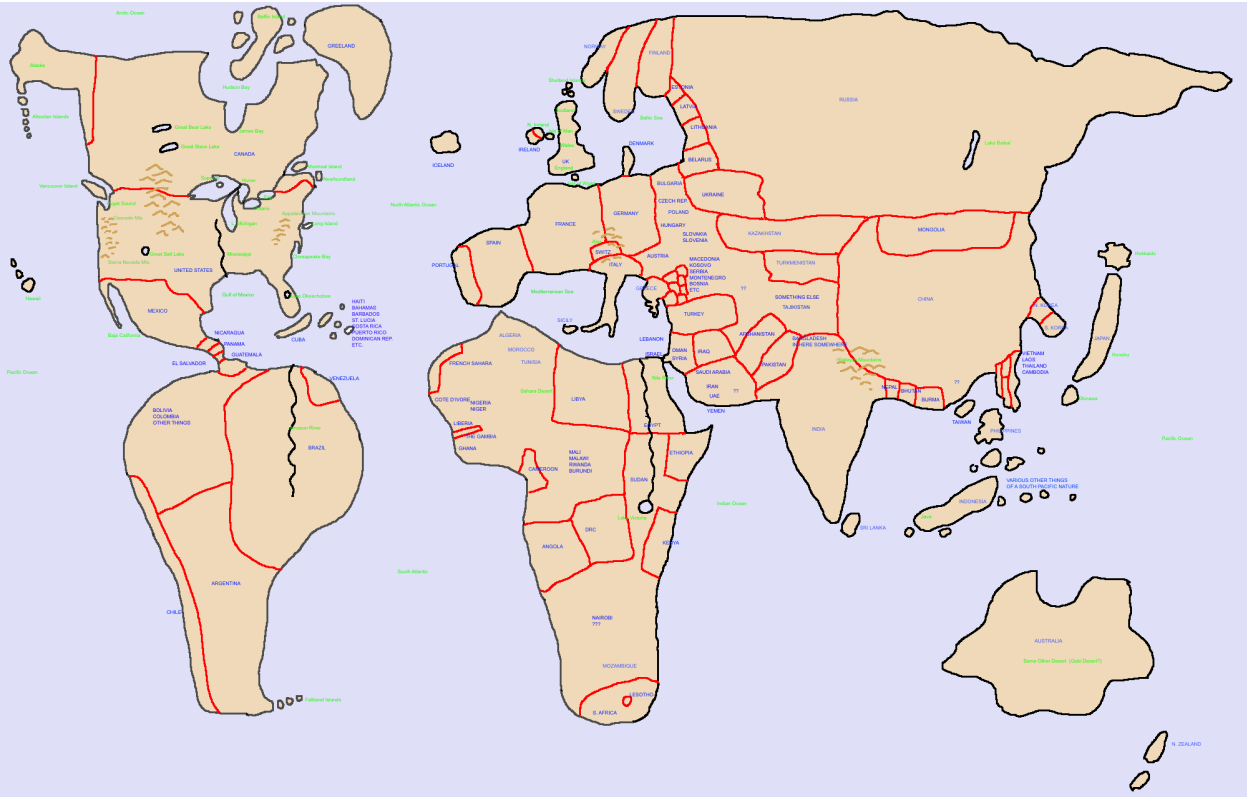
2) the humility and transcendence imparted by the necessarily unknown — that which lies beyond our powers of observation, perception, and conceptualization to name, describe, and explain.

So, we are both utterly, centrally important, as well as not important at all; infinity and zero come up again as metaphors, guides, or representatives.

After dismantling a panentheistic God as bad philosophy, and dismantling consciousness as mere user illusion, what's left? This! What you see before you. The world. Space. Cells under a microscope. Atoms and the subatomic. Look at the night sky with a pair of binoculars and memorize where some stuff is, and look up how far away and how big it is; I recommend the Stellarium app. I found a new constellation: in winter in the 3am night sky over Camino, California you can see three bright stars in formation: one of them is Jupiter, and the other two are the twins, Pollux and Castor (left to right). These three keep each other company although they are different kinds of objects and are far apart — constellations only work from one vantage point and are sort of like the game I often play where I hold my hand near my face and match up its edge with the edge of some object in the room. But this "existing while not really existing" is sort of the whole spiritual or meaning-maker point of constellations: they are there but only there locally. They are meaningful but only meaningful to you. If you look at Jupiter through mere binoculars you can make out a few cloud bands — it's quite amazing. I never knew all these years that you could walk outside and see Jupiter in some detail. Be the observer, as the dharmists tell us; watch your thoughts, and watch the world. Learn about both. This is all you have.

Greed is a problem, and power is a problem. "Capitalism" isn't the problem — the problem is that humans want more and more. I've done thought experiments where we get rid of money and it never goes well; if anyone can just *have* anything they want, then markets, manufacturing, distribution, etc, falls apart. Maybe some advanced form of trade where the value of goods and services is calculated by a computer?

Regardless of the methodology it's possible humans have to change. Many would say humans *must* change. They *have* changed, and will continue to change. Technology is part of evolution and that change has sped up recently. It seems we are indeed at a sort of crossroads that we might not go beyond, at least smoothly or recognizably. It also seems doubtful that humanity would go extinct entirely but a chokepoint where the population is reduced to a few thousand is within the realm of experience and possibility. Could we forget all the technology we've learned?



I don't think so; it seems like progress is a one way street, sort of like time. In the movie *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001) a future in 10,000 years is depicted, in which we have evolved into beings no longer recognizable as human; the implication is that humans will have merged with their technology and will have taken control of their own evolution to produce not a utopia per se, but an advanced mode of living. With the advent of AI, nascent at the time of this writing, the task may be to design a better brain: one not optimized for survival at any cost but for understanding, compassion, and quietude.

I don't want to be one of those new agers who does a touchy-feely, emotionally impactful bottom line that everyone knows already, like "be *excellent* unto each other" from *Bill and Ted's Excellent Adventure* (1989); I want to be unique, and brilliant (ME)! My position used to be that humans are not going to change based on something "soft" like psychology or sociology but might only manage it through brain surgery, chemicals, cybernetic augmentation, etc — material intervention. But the counterexample is a survey of the power structures around the world and across history; they have all been very different from each other. In contemporary northern Europe (Scandinavia and the Baltic states, Germany, the Netherlands) they seem to have gotten something right. In the Belgian Congo, they got something very wrong; the Aztecs did too. Doctors Without Borders got something very right. So culture counts for something — you can indeed cause a cohort of people to behave differently with only "soft" (textual) influence. The problem is, no one planned any of the aforementioned systems; at least not perfectly. One of the best examples of a planned designed to correct some of the errors of old is the United States of America. But the point is 1) culture is a viable force for change, and 2) we don't know how to control it.

The cosmos doesn't care if people are nice to each other (although God might), similarly to the way it doesn't care that lions kill other lions' cubs as a matter of course; behavior like this is just part of ethology and as such is a natural, physical, material process, like star formation or phage-host interaction. But it raises a point: humans are probably the only earthly species that can step back and be self critical. Evolution will do what it does, people will do what they do, and

technology will do what it does. It might be our destiny to get a handle on ecology and save ourselves from decimation, or it might not. We catch a glimpse of "reality" sometimes where we can see through the brains we were given, optimized to look for threats and compete for mates and hoard gold and kill off the people who don't look and act like us. Sometimes, we use this "stepping outside" ability to rationalize those monkey behaviors but I believe a better use would be to realize that none of this actually matters — you live for a while, then you die. You are compelled to have children and work a job because it feels good — because neurotransmitters are activated when you do these things, and because there's social pressure to do them.

I often feel envy and resentment when I watch people converse and they feel to me like characters on a television screen while I feel as though I am the home audience and locked out of the magic box. I think about how I am not normal and can't have normal conversations and respond normally or empathically because of my neuropsychological issues. I cannot have a normal life or the normal milestones other people *get*, like a family of my own and career and so on, because I am not normal. But maybe that's okay. Maybe I can do other things that other people can't or won't or don't do (like make a mean beef stroganoff). Furthermore, the discomfort I feel here amounts to the stories I tell myself, not in actually residing in my reality — in sitting here alone at my computer at night in my black hoodie. The latter is pretty nice. It's the idea of not *getting*, not *having* — it's always the language of acquisition and greed that resonates at times like those — that gets me down. But I feel good much of the time too. I love my family and friends and home and I have 20-40 more years here unless an advanced entity or process recreates my consciousness in or as some kind of computational system at some point in the far future, or in the meantime the star gods transform me into Superman, Q, or Dr. Manhattan; The Beyonder would be too much. Maybe I'm Azathoth already and dreaming the cosmos into being, since "this all takes place in consciousness!"[9]

Seriously, what should you actually do? I made a semi-joke in the first chapter about requiring everyone to own a microscope and a telescope. But observing the world around you and your own apparent centrality in it, and as a part of it, can amount to spiritual practice; if you want even more specific instructions, sit in the woods quietly, or do a walking meditation. I think meditation is good although it can be dangerous for me and drive me into a depression if I do it too much (I tried an hour a day for four days and felt awful and so briefly renounced it entirely; as of now I'm working on a re-approach plan). But more important than meditation is to be "meditating all the time" — to remain in the state of Samadhi where you are sitting and one with the universe and not calculating, planning, comparing, recollecting, and so on. I think it is not blasphemy to describe conscious meditative awareness as a brain state that can be "switched on" with certain conceptual triggers, like Eckhart Tolle's "the present moment," Ramana Maharshi's "consider the 'I' thought," or Nisargadatta Maharaj's "stay in the consciousness." Once you get used to the idea that there is a state of quiet awareness that benefits you emotionally and psychologically, your own simple trigger can work. I can now pretty reliably use "flip the switch." It reminds me of "tune in, turn on, drop out," from the 60s. If consciousness is God then flipping the switch is looking at God. Maybe it’s the closest we’re going to get.

Flipping the switch amounts to tuning in, or maybe turning on. But what about dropping out? It seems like the monastic endgame of this system, such that it is, would be to wander the earth with a pair of binoculars and a magnifying glass, peering at fungi and distant woods and forgetting to eat. Maybe you don't have to drop out, as in abandon your family, quit your job, and sit in a creek bed being bitten by mosquitos and bears, but a relaxation or easing of the requirements not necessarily of society but of particularism in general, might be prudent. But

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[9] I love fictional super-beings; as a teenager I was overjoyed when a "Q" episode of Star Trek aired on channel 20. It doesn't take an anthropologist to see that Marvel comic heroes fill some of the same slots as all the forgotten gods (if you get that reference then you win everything).

how do you *get* the two things in boldface at the beginning of this concluding chapter (the centrality of the self, and the humility and transcendence of the necessarily unknown)? Well for one thing it's probably good to let go of the notion of *getting* anything. That is a problem for religious adherents in general: people enter with the notion that they want to change something or become more or somehow get better, which is sort of paradoxically antithetical to the nature of religion, the aim or non-aim of which is an easing into the real or true or happy nature of reality. It's a paradox, like those most inclined to seek power being the least suitable to wield it. As they say in a lot of systems and explications, you are already it — you are already enlightened. You are already part of this world — you've just forgotten largely because humans are in a tough spot in their evolution as they transition from hunting mammoths to writing TPS reports. But hopefully, we won't be writing TPS reports for much longer and our lives will look more like the skinny noseless ice-beings in *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001).[10]

I have mood swings and I can get dark at times. The problem with imagination is that it has no limit, and I have uttered in a fury that I want to "null all that is." It's possible even suggesting this is an unpardonable evil, but it's also possible that this sort of hyperbole is an artifact of language and that any being who expresses something like this can't know the true gravity of what they are saying. It is said that the real big question is "why is there something rather than nothing?", and the answer may be that "nothing" just isn't possible – that's not how the cosmos, all that is, it, works. The power of imagination is readily seen in numbers. The number of Planck lengths in the diameter of the observable universe is (I have this number memorized):

3.5×10^{61}

Um...that's it? There's something underwhelming about it, just as there is something underwhelming about the entire grand scheme of all cosmological existence being made up of balls of plasma with smaller solid, liquid, and gaseous balls orbiting them, and on some of these balls life evolves and invents "Big League Chew." But that demonstrates the power of number notation — the power of human imagination to encapsulate.

Wesley Crusher, in a first season episode of *Star Trek: The Next Generation,* encounters The Traveller, a super-being with whom he eventually, in season 7, goes off to explore the universe in some transcendent way. It's a bit silly but perhaps mostly made so by the woodenness; Kevin Uxbridge is a much grander-seeming creature maybe only because of his actor's chops. But, the point is this dialog:

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WESLEY:     Is Mister Kosinski like he sounds? A joke?

TRAVELLER:  No, that's too cruel. He has sensed some small part of it.

WESLEY:     That space and time and thought aren't the separate things
            they appear to be? I just thought the formula you were
            using said something like that.

TRAVELLER:  Boy, don't ever say that again! And especially not at your
            age in a world that's not ready for such...such dangerous
            nonsense.
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[10] I have seen a lot of movies and watch some over and over in part because my TBI-related working memory deficits make apprehending new material difficult. My bank of 120 movies has become my "bible;" a body of text with which I am intimately familiar, and that keeps popping up for me.

As we begin to wrap up not only this chapter but the whole gosh darn thing here's some more chatGPT; I fed it this essay or booklet or whatever it is, during its early stages and when it would still fit into copypasta. These are the resultant criticisms (boldface is mine):

First: where does normativity live?

If there's no ground of being, no ultimate source of value, then values must be local, emergent, and contingent—but not arbitrary. Are they stabilized by evolutionary processes? **YES!!!** *Social practices?* **YES!!!** *Aesthetic resonance?* **YES!!!** *Ritual repetition?* ***MAYBE*!!!** *In other words, what makes something binding or sacred in a turtles-all-the-way-down cosmos?*

Second: what does "religious" mean here, exactly?

If it's not belief in a metaphysical ultimate, is it:

– a stance of reverence toward complexity? **YES!!!**
– disciplined attention to scale and interdependence? ***YES*!!!**
– practices that attune humans to their embeddedness? **YES!!!**
– a refusal of metaphysical closure itself? **YES!!!**

Finally, ChatGPT gave me a list of "egoic" behaviors that dharmic systems "typically interpret in spiritual contexts as evidence of continued self-identification or lack of full awakening" and then try to mitigate (in other words, don't do these). This is the third, final, and meatiest invocation of the Evil Robot:

Commonly Cited "Egoic" or "Unenlightened" Behaviors

Affective Reactions

- Feeling offended or insulted when criticized
- Experiencing jealousy, envy, or resentment
- Feeling pride or superiority in comparison to others
- Defensiveness in response to challenge or disagreement
- Anxiety about reputation or public image
- Fear of rejection, abandonment, or being misunderstood
- Longing for praise, validation, or recognition
- Persistent anger or irritation in daily life

Cognitive Patterns

- Narrating one's experience with "I," "me," and "mine"
- Mental storytelling about the past or imagined future
- Taking thoughts personally ("I am this thought")
- Ruminating over past mistakes or injustices
- Holding rigid opinions or strong ideological attachments
- Interpreting events in terms of personal meaning ("this happened to me")

Interpersonal Dynamics

- Seeking status or approval from others
- Competing for recognition, dominance, or control
- Needing to "win" arguments or be right
- Using spiritual language to elevate oneself
- Expecting special treatment or deference

- Manipulating others for attention, influence, or intimacy

Motivational Drives

- Ambition for success, achievement, or influence
- Fear of failure or irrelevance
- Desire to accumulate wealth, security, or comfort
- Spiritual striving: desire to attain, improve, or "get somewhere"
- Somatic and Embodied Reactions
- Startle reflexes or bodily tension under threat
- Fight-or-flight responses during confrontation
- Emotional responses to loss (e.g., grief, despair)
- Craving for pleasure or aversion to pain
- Avoidance of uncertainty or discomfort

Symbolic or Narrative Investments

- Identifying with personal roles (parent, partner, teacher)
- Investing meaning in personal history or trauma
- Defining oneself by nationality, gender, profession, or group
- Needing a life "purpose" or personal destiny
- Believing one's suffering is unique or especially significant

Spiritualized Ego Behaviors

- Believing oneself to be more advanced or awakened
- Judging others as less evolved or "asleep"
- Using spiritual practice to reinforce identity
- Performing humility or non-reactivity for others to see
- Claiming detachment while subtly signaling superiority

I do almost all of these — I am a sinner or a child according to Eckhart Tolle et al. The problem, though, is that this list reads like a list of long term symptoms of traumatic brain injury, and so begs the question: "where do we draw the line between mental illness and just being a poorly developed person?" No one knows, especially in the case of disorders like bipolar and borderline, which look like what is commonly identified in lay society as self-centered, dramatic, or "toxic." It make me think of Christianity and the concept of sin as an inherent flaw or unsolvable problem with human existence, being, or structure. The following is from the Lutheran Book of Worship:

Order for Confession and Forgiveness

P: In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

C: Amen.

P: Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid: Cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you and worthily magnify your holy name, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

C: Amen.

P: If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us. But if we confess our sins, God who is faithful and just will forgive our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness. (1 John 1:8-9)

P: Most merciful God,

C: we confess that we are in bondage to sin and cannot free ourselves. We have sinned against you in thought, word, and deed, by what we have done and by what we have left undone. We have not loved you with our whole heart; we have not loved our neighbors as ourselves. For the sake of your Son, Jesus Christ, have mercy on us. Forgive us, renew us, and lead us, so that we may delight in your will and walk in your ways, to the glory of your holy name. Amen.

P: Almighty God, in his mercy, has given his Son to die for us and, for his sake, forgives us all our sins. As a called and ordained minister of the Church of Christ, and by his authority, I therefore declare to you the entire forgiveness of all your sins, in the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

C: Amen.

Both of the above remind me in part but largely, grandly, holistically, of…

The 12 Traditions from Alcoholics Anonymous

1) We admitted we were powerless over alcohol — that our lives had become unmanageable.

2) Came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.

3) Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God as we understood Him.

4) Made a searching and fearless moral inventory of ourselves.

5) Admitted to God, to ourselves, and to another human being the exact nature of our wrongs.

6) Were entirely ready to have God remove all these defects of character.

7) Humbly asked Him to remove our shortcomings.

8) Made a list of all persons we had harmed, and became willing to make amends to them all.

9) Made direct amends to such people wherever possible, except when to do so would injure them or others.

10) Continued to take personal inventory and when we were wrong promptly admitted it.

11) Sought through prayer and meditation to improve our conscious contact with God as we understood Him, praying only for knowledge of His will for us and the power to carry that out.

12) Having had a spiritual awakening as the result of these Steps, we tried to carry this message to alcoholics, and to practice these principles in all our affairs.

The common idea is that we are not right — there is something wrong, and the un-augmented individual is pretty much stuck in this state of inadequacy. So for buddhistic or hinduistic (dharmic) notions of ego and wrongheaded notions of the "self," the grand object to which we turn for salvation is the "true self," or Brahman, or the Great Realization (human conscious

awareness is the same thing as the foundational substance of the universe), or in the case of Buddhism, a sort of happy nothingness/freedom or nihilism/freedom (Nirvana).

What's missing from the dharmic notion of "sin" (error) is the confession or declaration of helplessness. This omission is in line with something I've observed about dharmic systems: they are better at stating problems than they are at solving them, and put a lot onto "human effort" (strange in the face of the deterministic metaphysics dharmic systems seem to purport), which can go wrong in any number of ways. Buddhism to its credit at least has the admittedly vague and fuzzy eightfold path but Hinduism (Advaita Vedanta, really) is silent on how, exactly, one is supposed to "realize the self" (Ramana gave us self inquiry but it's difficult and a late addition).

The notion that we humans are faulty in some basic and grand way is dangerously exploitable as well as potentially counterproductive to happiness, contentment, or peace. But remains, in the real world, that we are cavemen with iPhones and our brains are structured for a very different civilized technological society than the one we live in. But maybe this inherent "something is off or wrong" discomfort with existence was inbuilt even in Neolithic times; we were anatomically modern then, and perhaps culture has not changed as much as we sometimes think.

It is tempting to say there's nothing wrong, and that religion creates a problem out of thin air only so that it can solve it and create the byproduct of all sorts of hierarchies and oppressions and so on; that it is is memetic virus that doesn't need to exist. Maybe there's a middle path here: yes there's something wrong, but also no there's nothing wrong? Or maybe it's like Buddhism says: life is difficult, but when you realize this, life is no longer difficult, not via magic or erasure, but through psychological transcendence: yes the clamps are on, but so what? I always seem to re-arrive at buddhistic wisdom but I can't stand the tagalong supernaturalism (rebirth, karma, samsara, unless carefully and contemporarily reinterpreted), especially in the face of claims that Buddhism "makes sense" and is so much more evolved and modern than Bronze Age theism.

A lot of morality and ethics and law and what they teach you in preschool is Kantian in nature; if everyone does it, it's good for everyone, but if one person ignores it, that one person can benefit if he feels ok about ignoring it and is not severely punished (preschool doesn't teach you that last part). I guess this is sort of a philosophy of criminality.

People don't need philosophy to do the right thing; in fact it might be detrimental in that you get caught up in abstracted logic and OCD'ish "if/then"-type constructs. I knew a philosophy prof who was hired by big business for ethics consulting, and who knows what he said or wrote ("make money, but not too hard"). Moral philosophy is sort of a unique field in that maybe you tend to use your intuition or emotions as a guide, and only then talk about it later — justify your decision. I'm new to this so it's likely I'm descending into known territory and there are answers for these things.

I'm pretty sure *they* talk about some acts being "morally insignificant," like whether or not to tap the desk with my finger right now. Should I do it? My guess is that if polled a majority of people would vote that I do it, just because it's "a thing" — I've brought it up, called it into existence, and I believe there's a tendency to do rather than not do. I never did it...I forgot about it while writing the above. Also, it seems OCD'ish, something I struggle with a bit. For a long time I would pat Mandy, a doll who belonged to my mom and who sits at the top of the stairs, on the head, and then give the small plushie snowman she holds in her lap a pat too, every time I passed by. This seems pretty innocent, and maybe even cute or desirable in some way. But it got out of hand and was starting to disturb me, so I forced myself to stop — now Mandy and Snowman are neglected, even though I still think about them every time (or most times, some times) I go down the stairs. This is one way an insignificant act can become significant.

I have heard that conservation is the highest good but I'm not sure I agree. An easy out would be to get all Nietzschean and say that man gave himself all his good and evil — that there are no moral absolutes. I guess I would answer back, "of course, unless you're some kind of theist." Ethics can and should be contextual — they differ depending on the situation. It can be fun or interesting to ponder every single act and judge whether or not it's the "right thing." What often throws a wrench into these gears is one's personal psychological needs, so maybe it's wise when doing these types of thought experiments to discard those — pretend the act doesn't matter to you, won't make you happy, cause you to succumb to OCD, etc.

In that case I think I have determined that tapping the desk is unethical, because it is wear and tear on the desk — resource use, yet again. But the thing is, ethics just amounts to whatever you think of; there are practically unlimited reasons something might be good or bad, and categorization amounts to whatever you come up with first. Should I write? Yes it's good for me. No it's a waste of resources (bandwidth, disk space). Maybe it often or always (!) comes down to that dichotomy: psychological health vs resource waste. I think this dichotomy could end up going nowhere, because you get into weighing the gas burned on a drive to McDonald's vs the happiness acquired from a Big Mac, and then this sort of pedantry or over-detailedness or inappropriate use of mathematics indicates that ethics/morality should stay intuitive.
I'm focusing on the weird ambiguous middle ground cases. There are more obvious ones, like whether or not to torture an animal. Problem is, this leads to veganism due to factory farming practices. Is it morally acceptable to only have a burger on your birthday? Double patty or single?

All this stewing might be a reason some people take refuge in the Bible or Koran or some other wisdom text(s): you don't have to determine what good behavior is, either for yourself generally, or worse — contextually, for every situation. Instead, you just go by the guide and spend time and energy on other things rather than succumb to "analysis paralysis" and become Buridan's Ass.

I endeavor to keep my ego in check because ego looks bad. Wanting to look good, even if that version of "good" really means enlightened or evolved or whatever, clearly amounts to more ego. So, moving toward killing or suppressing or just awareness of the ego, can be a trap. I bet a lot of new agers fall into the "ego of no ego" or "more enlightened than thou" snare.

The real reason, the valid reason, etc, for awareness of and potentially diminishing the ego is that said ego is harmful: to yourself, to others, to the planet, and to the universe (cosmos?). I see ego in other people and fantasize about calling them out on it: "your ego is showing," which is obvious scumbaggery; ego always sees and is bothered by other ego. Q: How do you tell a narcissist? A: He accuses you of being a narcissist.

A narcissist is someone better looking than you. - Gor Vidal, known narcissist

So, first of all, there's Freudian ego. I don't really know what this is but it's something like pure rationality negotiating between childlike desires and moral ideals. And then there's Dharmic or new age ego, which could be the sense of (false) self, or the feeling of being you. This sounds a lot like consciousness to my ear, but consciousness is supposed to be good or desirable or true while ego is bad or undesirable or false. I dunno, I think there's some confusion in this ontology. Anyway, ego is also sometimes taken, in the parlance of our times, to be pride or excessive pride: "that baseball player has a lot of ego," when he's grinning and dancing around and pointing to himself after hitting a home run. Is there a broad strand that connects all these "ego" constructs? I find it especially perplexing that ego can look like consciousness and that you're supposed to distinguish between the "true self" and "false self," with the the false self being the stories you tell yourself about "you," and the true self being pure awareness. This smells like pre-neuroscience BS, and maybe "ego" is just selfishly inconsiderate behavior, but no — "ego" in the

Dharmic sense is "the construct of 'me' that can be hurt by words." As far as Freud goes, who can say? His concepts of id, ego, and superego all seem like they could function as "the 'I' thought."

Maybe ego is a thing such that the correct way around it amounts to taking a step back and not allowing your behavior to amount only to reactions to stimuli. Try pausing for a second and thinking something like "I am me," and turning more and more inward to focus on that inward-turning itself, as opposed to the wall in front of you or the sounds outside...try slowing things down and not actively pursuing any thoughts. Another way "in" is the present moment, as discussed by Albert Camus and Eckhart Tolle. This is basically meditation, and I think Ramana Maharshi et al did/do this Jedi mind trick 24/7, although Ramana still ate and went to the bathroom and went for walks and wrote things down, so I dunno. Maybe it doesn't take much to be a spiritual teacher/figure/leader, and all you have to do is look weird and not get angry or speak too fast. There's a notion that we are all enlightened or self-realized (or saved, or submitted...etc) and just require occasional reminders.

Another trap related to "ego of no ego" is spending all your time thinking about having no thoughts. I've seen this and I don't think the people who do it can really help it; they write guides to enlightenment instead of just existing, because that is how their brains are: they are intellectuals, for better or for worse. Eckhart Tolle falls into this, and so does Stephen Wolinsky, and Krishnamurti, and Nisargadatta Maharaj. Basically all of them, except for Ramana Maharshi, and even he produced a surprising amount of text — he wasn't just a bump on a log despite most often being portrayed as such. Maybe these "spiritual teachers" are stuck in a state of non-enlightenment where they jibber all day — a sacrifice they make for the benefit of the public, who can absorb their text and then become one with the universe, without writing more screeds themselves.

I mentioned that I used chatGPT three times in this document: to produce a writing prompt which I then responded to, to generate a list of anti-enlightenment behaviors, and most questionably to produce some criticisms of this work when it still fit into copypasta. This second of three incarnations is questionable because it comes dangerously close to chatGPT doing my writing for me. Should I credit openAI? Give Sam Altman a portion of the enormous profits that are sure to follow publication? Instead of delving deeply into those criticisms I just handled the implicit suggests by answering **YES!!!** or **MAYBE!!!** in boldface after them. Again: lazy, but maybe it worked out. Let's revisit them, compact them, then flesh them out:

Since there is no ground of being and no ultimate source of value, values must be local, emergent, and contingent, but not arbitrary. They are stabilized by evolutionary processes, social practices, and aesthetic resonance.

What does this mean for us?

Evolution is the source of morality since the penalty for transgression is death — a society that permitted murder, stealing, or incest would be unstable and probably would not last long. The inbuilt social practices of humans don't depend on or result from codification, and they include a self-correction mechanism such that we can identify (in retrospect) cultures that don't work (Aztecs, Belgian Congo, Saddam's Iraq, etc) and change them. Culture and technology are evolving; we are in a better spot now than we were in the Middle Ages, by any intuitive assessment. Beauty is truth and truth is beauty. Beauty is inherently meaningful and although it can appear to be corruptible by capitalism (only the rich can afford it), this amounts to outdated fine arts practice and really what people are valuing under that rubric is closer to hierarchy and tradition than some theoretical culturally independent aesthetic.

Since "religious" in this case does not mean a belief in a metaphysical ultimate, it is instead a stance of reverence toward complexity, disciplined attention to scale and interdependence, practices that attune humans to their embeddedness, and a refusal of metaphysical closure itself.

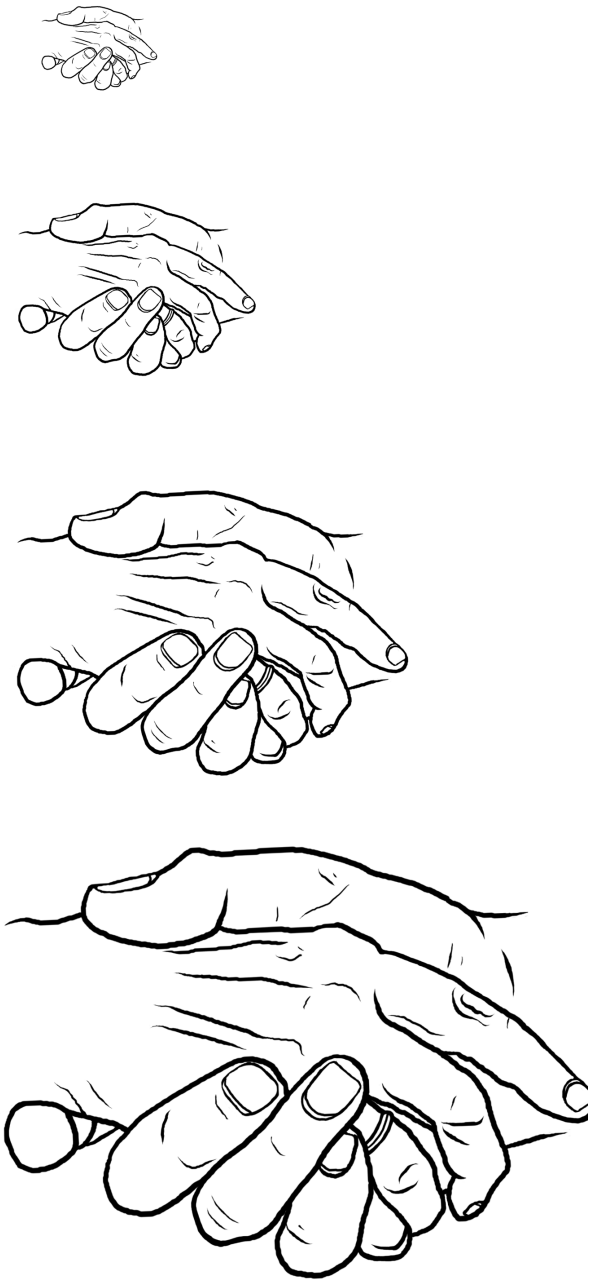
What does this mean for us?

Get a telescope and a microscope and go look at stuff (or just go on nature walks and watch the occasional sunrise). Learn about the world and the universe. Speculate about the cosmos and everything that is smaller than you as well as bigger than you. Read about history, religion, science, and philosophy, using the LLM of your choice to make the reading interactive and stick to your long term memory better. You are here for a while and it would be good to understand it all to the best of your ability. Meditate and practice mindfulness — "flip the switch." Realize and understand that you are part of the world and that the world is part of you. You are radically important because there's no reason to privilege any object at any scale, since scale goes on forever in both directions. Believe in God, or don't; make use of God, or don't. Take care what you do, and turn your attention inward on your own conscious experience. Stay humble. Practice temperance and moderation. Beware of greed and power, as they are paths to hell.

Follow nutritional and exercise guidelines and do some volunteer work or at least post on social media telling people what they should and should not do (I'm being sarcastic but…you know). Be excellent unto each other.

It is easy to become confused by these questions. It is difficult to know what to do. We should talk about this some more. That is all I have to say. - Chief Ten Bears, in *Dances With Wolves* (1990).

THE END



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The New Oxford Annotated Bible with the Apocrypha: New Revised Standard Version. Michael D. Coogan, ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 2010.

I have always disliked assembling bibliographies. They don't reflect the way I write (diaristically, off the top of my head) and their only potential advantage is to dress up in a suit and a tie.

I make use of references in this work and many are cited incompletely in the text. But some assertions are based on memory, sometimes verified with Wikipedia, an LLM, or web search, and those remain uncited. For the calculations in the "Church" chapter, I mostly used Wolfram Alpha. Movie quotes probably came from IMDB, or in some cases, I reproduced them from memory and they may be slightly inaccurate. I reprint text from the Lutheran Book of Worship and Alcoholics Anonymous literature but what I copied was itself a copy. GPT text is in here verbatim or edited but I am clear about it where that takes place. Information on Ramana Maharshi, the religions of the world, and the structure of the universe comes from Youtube videos or is crystalized knowledge dating back 10, 20, 30 years. I perused a few of my paperbacks to see how I should configure the front and end matter (THIS PAGE INTENTIONALLY LEFT BLANK). Other specificities remain unexplained.

Bibliographic informality can amount to an internettish, lazy or dishonest-seeming "do your own research"-type position, but bear with me. I may have facts wrong or incomplete, like a hadron being only a proton or a neutron (a hadron can also be a meson). I hope sloppiness does not detract bigly from this work, the main purpose of which is to be spiritual, philosophical, psychological, rather than (purely) factual.

To lawyer up, the softness or ambiguity with which I approach references reflects a way of handling information: attachment to traceability is outdated and becoming more so, what with the advent of large language models, search results, social media, and the internet — changeable electronic media in general — as well as culture-at-large becoming more fast twitch and short form.

I am operating in good faith but your mileage may vary.

But What About This?

When I read "about the author" or "about this book" bits written in the third person, I suspect that in many or most cases the author wrote it while pretending to be someone else. I have been writing about spiritual topics since I arrived in California in 2015, and then more recently I had been wanting to put something together about the micro/macrocosm — my first idea was a Youtube video, and I tried to learn Blender thinking I would "throw together" an animation; that didn't work out. So why not just do what I know (writing)? As I wrote somewhere far above, blogging didn't work out either. Websites simply aren't preservation media and need to be continually maintained; once the creator/author stops or dies, they disappear.

Here's what I prepared for Amazon:

With a blend of intellectualism, pop culture, anecdote, and original artwork, "What's This?" suggests an infinite continuum of cellular/fractal substructure, exemplified by cells in a leaf and universes in a multiverse, as a way a science-focused person can have a spiritual life or view without adopting "alternate facts" that contradict scientific revelation. Postmodern anti-foundational pantheistic naturalism gets its religiosity from the juxtaposition of the centrality of the self as it resides at an unprivileged point on this continuum, with infinite structure above and below, and the humility and transcendence imparted by the necessarily unknown — that which lies beyond our powers of observation, perception, and conceptualization to name, describe, and explain.

This is a short work; I'm seeing 22,443 words, including this paragraph. The Upanishads are only around 70 pages. Just sayin'.

If you dig deep enough you tend to find something in extant religions that contradicts scientific revelation; what if instead you started from a position of refusing to do that? I begin with Carl Sagan's statement on science and religion, which implies that not only do science and religion not cancel each other out, but that they are inherently self supporting, and may even be the same thing, in that they locate you in terms of everything else that is. The atom was formally described in 1804 and I don't know that this triggered a revelation of "everything is one" and "we are the same thing as the universe," but in my estimation it should have.

I grew up drawing and painting and eventually received a Master of Fine Arts degree from the University of Western Ontario in a program that stressed writing as much as art. I've delivered pizza, administratively assisted, wandered bodily around retail stores, attempted to repair bicycles, and graded papers, but eventually "retired" after a traumatic brain injury along with pre-existing neuropsychological issues made conventional employment difficult or impossible.

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